



A FIGHT  
FOR THE LADY

SCOUNDRELS & REDEMPTION

*Joyce Alec*

# **A Fight for the Lady**

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Scoundrels and Redemption Book Two

Joyce Alec

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## A Fight for the Lady

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# Love Light Faith

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# Prologue

“She does look *wonderfully* happy, does she not?”

Lady Violet let out a long, contented sigh as she watched her friend make her way towards the waiting carriage, seeing how her new husband watched her with such love in his expression that it was plain for all to see.

“She is happy,” Violet replied as she and her sister stood together to wave their friend off. “Lord and Lady Wymark.” She sighed happily again. “How good that sounds.”

Together with Lady Lydia’s family and friends, they waved off their friend as the carriage trundled away, truly happy that she had found such an excellent match in Lord Wymark.

“I had thought that your daughter had captured the eye of the Duke of Claverhouse.”

Violet turned her head to see a somewhat rotund, older lady speaking loudly to Lady Lydia’s mother, Lady Burton. Lady Burton was smiling graciously, although Violet could hardly imagine what she must be thinking at such a thoughtless remark.

“My daughter has been permitted to make her own choice as regards matrimony,” Lady Burton replied as Violet shared a glance with her sister, Lady Mary. “Both Lord Burton and I are delighted with Lord Wymark and think that it is the most excellent match.”

“Oh, but surely a duke would have been preferred,” the lady said, and Violet’s eyes flared wide as she and Lady Mary continued to listen. “Think of the title. Think of the wealth and the standing in society. I cannot imagine that I would *ever* permit a daughter of mine to refuse someone as high as a duke.”

Violet linked arms with her sister and together, they stepped away, leaving Lady Burton to continue with the awkward conversation without being overheard. She and Lady Mary walked quietly together for a few moments as they made their way back towards the house, where a few final refreshments would be waiting for them.

“I do not think that particular lady has any awareness of the Duke of Claverhouse’s true nature,” Lady Mary murmured after a

few moments. "Although that is to be expected, I suppose."

Violet nodded, her expression rather thoughtful. Before she had wed, Lady Lydia had spoken to both Violet and Lady Mary, telling them that they needed to be on their guard when it came to the Duke of Claverhouse. She had not gone into every detail, but needless to say, there was a good deal wrong with the Duke's character, and Violet had been a little upset to hear the truth from Lady Lydia's lips. After all, the Duke of Claverhouse was every bit a duke and every young lady in the *ton* sought to be in his company. They all were hopeful for his eyes to rest upon them and for his interest to be piqued when they were conversing with him. For to be wed to a duke would make the favored young lady a duchess, and that would certainly set them apart from the rest of society.

Violet did not want to admit to herself how the thought of being so favored was still of great interest to her, but as she continued to meander back towards the house, she had to concede that the Duke of Claverhouse was still something of an interest for her, despite Lady Lydia's warnings.

"I do not think I will be eager for his company," she heard her sister say, realizing that she had not heard Lady Mary's conversation for the last few minutes, due to her own thoughts filling her head. "Lydia did us a great favor to speak so honestly. It is clear that she was greatly concerned for us."

"The Duke of Claverhouse is still a duke, however, regardless of how he appeared to Lydia," Violet found herself saying, not at all surprised when her sister stopped walking abruptly, turning to stare at her with wide eyes. "I know he may have treated Lydia ill, but that does not mean that he will do so again."

"My dear sister," Lady Mary said, her eyes rounding. "You cannot be so foolish as to ignore all that Lydia said to us. After all, it appeared that the Duke did not have the intentions that were so apparent to everyone else. Surely that speaks to his false nature."

Violet did not want to agree, but seeing that she had no other recourse, she found herself nodding.

"But a poor character can be redeemed, can it not?" she considered, even though she knew that there was no evidence of such a thing at present. "The Duke might very well come to regret what he has done as regards Lydia and will be much more considered and much more careful now that she has discovered him."

"We cannot know that," Lady Mary replied guardedly. "I would sooner take the word of my friend over anything that suggests a gentleman *might* change his character, for that is only supposition."

Sighing inwardly, Violet nodded slowly and thought to push her considerations to the back of her mind. It was not the time or the place to permit such thoughts, and she did not need to so much as think of the Duke of Claverhouse at this present moment. After all, her sister was right to state that Lydia had spoken to them out of the care and consideration she had for them, and Violet ought to be more than grateful.

And yet, as loath as she was to admit it, there was a part of her that wanted very much to see if *she* might be the one to catch the Duke of Claverhouse, if *she* could be the one to prevent him from straying further down the ill-considered path he had chosen, so that they might find a happiness together that would set them both into a place of contentment and security.

"We had a pact that we would not speak of the Duke of Claverhouse to one another, did we not?" Her words, she knew, were tinged with a harshness that Violet fought hard to conceal. "I think it would be best if we continued with such an agreement." She tried to ignore the flicker of hurt that crossed her sister's face, seeing the confusion in Lady Mary's eyes as she studied Violet carefully. "We may have a slight differing in our opinions, that is all," Violet explained hurriedly. "I should not wish for us to argue. Nor should I wish to upset either Miss Kelling or our cousin Sarah, should the Duke be mentioned. After all, Lydia told us that she was to speak to them both about the Duke also."

There was silence for some moments, and it was only when they began to climb the steps to enter Lord and Lady Burton's townhouse that Lady Mary spoke again.

"If you do not wish for us to discuss the Duke of Claverhouse, as we agreed before, then I will not do so," she promised quietly. "Although I will admit to being a trifle concerned, my dear sister. We still have a few months of the Season left and the Duke of Claverhouse is still very much a part of it."

"You need not be," Violet replied swiftly, placing a confident smile on her face that she did not truly feel. "I will remember all that Lydia said of the Duke and will think on it carefully before continuing with any further acquaintance, I assure you."

This did not bring any sort of brightness to her sister's



demeanor. In fact, Lady Mary seemed to be all the more anxious, for her lips twisted and pulled to one side and her eyes studied Violet for a long moment. But then the moment was gone as the butler greeted them and showed them into the house, encouraging them to make their way to the drawing room where more refreshments and company were waiting. Violet smiled and nodded before walking alongside her sister into the room, greeted warmly by the buzz of conversation and laughter. She sighed contentedly to herself and set all thought of the Duke from her mind. For the moment, she would enjoy the afternoon and the friends and acquaintances that were present. Whatever happened as regarded the Duke of Claverhouse was something she would worry about at a later time.

# 1

Riding back into London was one of Samuel's pleasures. He had been absent from society last summer and had not even made it back to London for the winter Season. It had been most frustrating but entirely necessary, given the state of affairs at the time. Having assumed the title of the Marquess of Coatbridge a little less than two years ago, Samuel had been forced to delve deeply into the accounts and into the running of the estate. Being somewhat brutal in his honesty, Samuel's solicitor had predicted that, unless significant changes were made and coffers increased, the estate would fall into ruin in less than five years.

Thankfully, that had not yet occurred. Samuel had taken the warning seriously, cursing himself quietly that he had not sought to encourage or support his ailing father in the final few years of his life. Had he done so rather than living a few years on the continent in order to encourage his interests there to improve, then he might have been able to prevent his late father from falling into such a state of disorder. However, despite his regrets, Samuel was glad that his estate was now back to a good situation, which meant that he was finally able to make his way to London for what remained of the Season.

It had been some years since he had first set foot in the city, but even now, as he rode through the dirty streets and heard the shouts and exclamations of those around him, Samuel let a broad smile spread across his face. He was glad that he had chosen to ride from the inn where he had rested overnight, instead of taking his carriage as he had initially planned. The driver would soon be at the house with his luggage, but Samuel himself intended to arrive on horseback. Soon, he would reach his townhouse and would be able to settle into a life in the city, filled with nothing but balls, soirees, good conversation, and beautiful young ladies. Samuel could hardly wait for his first invitation to arrive. Such thoughts, however, did not entirely distract Samuel from noticing the dark, shadowy alleys and the stench that assailed his nostrils as he rode. It was unfortunate, he considered, that he had to make his way

through the poorer part of London before he could arrive at the much more pleasant streets where his own house was situated. Sighing, he urged his horse on a little more quickly, a little frustrated at the carts, donkeys, other riders, and the occasional carriage that slowed his pace.

“A penny for me, milord?”

A trifle annoyed, Samuel looked down to see a small boy, grey with dirt and soot, reaching out one grubby hand towards him. Instantly, he recoiled, but his horse, for whatever reason, decided to stop still, as though concerned for the child.

“A coin?” he asked, seeing the boy nod and look up at him with eager eyes. “And what would this coin be for?”

The boy shrugged. “Food.”

“Then why do I not fetch you some food instead?” Samuel asked, one brow lifting. He knew all too well that such children were often told to give all of their money to the one in charge of such endeavors. This one adult would make certain that the children were all fed and had somewhere to sleep, but their task during the daytime—in order to *pay* for such a thing—would be to take as much money from the unsuspecting rich as they could. Samuel did not begrudge the child a single coin but feared what might occur should he give him one. Glancing all around him, he then fixed the child with a sharp eye and saw the soft, innocent face looking back at him.

“I—I am not hungry now, milord.”

Samuel shook his head, sighing inwardly. It was clear the child only wanted the money as opposed to sustenance. “Then what will you do with whatever coin I give you?” he asked, one brow lifting. “If it is not to buy food, then what else might you need it for?”

He expected the boy to stutter and stammer but, much to Samuel’s surprise, the boy’s face changed from one of innocence to one of anger.

“I just want a coin!” he exclaimed, stamping his foot as his hands curled into fists. “I *need* it! You have plenty of them, mister, I’m sure. Just look at you.” His little face began to go red, but Samuel merely lifted his brows in surprise at the boy’s reaction. “Why can’t you just give me one?” Much to Samuel’s astonishment, the boy stepped forward and began to pummel the horse’s flank with both fists and, occasionally, caught Samuel’s leg in the process. His own exclamations and protestations seemed to do nothing to

stop the child, and the horse itself, a little frightened and, no doubt, in some pain, sidestepped and attempted to move away. The road, however, was still much too busy and the horse could go nowhere other than a few steps forward and then to its right—but the boy, determined in his anger, simply followed them.

“That is enough!”

Samuel jumped down from his horse and reprimand the small boy, only for his horse to suddenly rear up, unseating him entirely. He fell backwards with an almighty thud, falling hard onto the pavement as the wind was knocked out of him by force. Struggling to get his breath, he tried to sit upright, lifting his head to see the small boy being knocked down by the horse’s hooves. Horrified, he tried to lift himself up, relieved when others came to help him. Once he was standing, he made his way towards the small boy, staggering somewhat as he attempted to regain his composure.

“Is he alive?”

His breath was rasping and his voice hoarse as he approached, seeing the slightly fuzzy outline of the boy as his eyes struggled to focus. Someone had a hold of his horse whilst two others bent over the child, forcing Samuel to draw closer.

Blood was pouring from a wound in the child’s head. His eyes were closed and there was a paleness in his face that spoke of unconsciousness. Samuel swallowed hard, his heart pounding with a sudden fear that the child was dead and that it was his doing. If he had only just given the child a coin—for, of course, he had more than enough to be generous with such a trifle—then there would not have been this accident.

The boy’s chest suddenly rose and fell, and Samuel let out a gasp of relief, closing his eyes for a moment.

“Does anyone know who this child belongs to?” he asked, looking about at those who had assisted him as well as those who were now watching as the situation unfolded. They were somewhat poorly dressed, and for the first time, Samuel felt a little unsafe, fearing that he might well be taken advantage of given that his status was so clearly above their own. Swallowing hard, he turned back to where the small boy lay, relieved that he was alive at least. No one had stepped forward to claim him, no one had even said a single word about who he might be. Samuel did not even know the child’s name.

“I could pay someone to take care of him,” he murmured,

looking all around and wondering who he might ask. The problem was, however, that he could not be guaranteed that the boy *would* be cared for until he recovered, and secondly, that the person who agreed to do as Samuel had asked would not demand more from him, should it come to light that the boy was more severely injured than Samuel expected. Nor could he know for certain that the boy would actually be given the care he required, for what if the person who promised to do so simply took Samuel's money and left the boy alone?

*You know what you must do.*

His conscience spoke to him, and Samuel bowed his head for a moment, knowing precisely what was required. As much as he did not wish to do so, the boy would have to be taken to his own townhouse, so that he might make certain that he recovered well and was left without any lasting injury. The thought of leaving the boy here was not one that he could entertain, even though he knew it was very odd indeed for a gentleman of the *ton* to care in such an obvious and concrete manner. *After all*, his mind said quietly, *what is this boy to you? Nothing but a street urchin, and there are hundreds of those. Why should one boy make any difference?*

Samuel shook his head. He was not about to behave in such an uncaring, and quite frankly, despicable manner. Perhaps he would be able to help the boy to find a more improved vocation other than waylaying gentlemen in order to gain a penny or two from their hand.

"Can you lift him?" He turned to one of the burlier men who had come closer to see precisely what was happening. "I will pay you well for the trouble."

The man was short, broad, and with a thick moustache which covered a good deal of his mouth, but Samuel was still able to see the immediate delight that threw itself into his expression at the offer of money. Stepping forward, the man made to bend down and scoop the boy into his arms, only for Samuel to exclaim aloud.

"With great care!" he cried, one hand reaching out to stop the man from lifting the boy as though he were merely a sack of flour. "The boy is injured. You must work with great gentleness."

The man turned, nodded, and then made his way back down to the boy's side. Rather than simply grasping one arm and one leg—which Samuel had been afraid he had been about to do—the man placed one hand under the boy's head, with his other arm under the

boy's knees. He lifted him with ease and the child's head lolled against the man's shoulder, his eyes still tightly closed. Relieved that all had gone well, Samuel threw a coin to the young lady holding his horse and then attempted to mount. It took him two attempts given his unsteadiness and Samuel did his best to ignore the titters of laughter that came from those observing him. With the man looking up at him, Samuel held out a guinea and saw the man's eyes flicker.

"Two of these, if you bring him to my townhouse," he said, hearing how the onlookers had fallen suddenly silent. "Three if you do so with great care and gentleness, for I do not want that child to be in any more pain or suffer any further injury. Do you understand?"

The man grinned and nodded, leaving Samuel with the satisfactory feeling that he would do precisely as he was asked. Casting one final glance at the boy, he gave the man directions and then turned his horse's nose in the very same direction.



\* \* \*

"Welcome, my lord."

Samuel did not so much as smile. "There is a young boy being brought here, Peters," he said, addressing his butler, before gesturing for two footmen who were approaching the front door to return to him. "He is to be cared for in the servants' quarters. Is there a room for him where he might recover?" He looked hard at his butler, impatiently waiting for his answer whilst his butler blinked rapidly several times, clearly a little surprised. This was not at all what he had expected the arrival of his master to be.

"A room, my lord?" he repeated as Samuel nodded quickly. "Yes, I—I am sure that we can find a place for the child." He glanced at the two waiting footmen, who both nodded and turned

away to prepare a room for the child, although there was still a hesitation about them that Samuel did not quite understand.

"The horse's hooves struck him," Samuel added, quickly peeling off his jacket and handing it to his bemused butler. "There was no one else to take care of him, and I could not simply leave the boy lying on the street." He did not know why he was justifying himself to the butler, but for whatever reason, he could not prevent himself from speaking. "There is a man coming with the boy and he is to be shown into the room with the child at once and then you are to pay him three guineas." He pulled out some coins from his pocket and handed them to the butler, without considering whether not the correct amount was there. "Have one of the maids make certain his wound is cleaned before the doctor arrives."

The butler blinked slowly, in a somewhat owlish fashion. "The doctor?"

"Yes." Samuel stopped dead, realizing he had not yet sent for the doctor. "Have one of the servants go for a doctor at once," he added, feeling rather foolish. "At once," he repeated, emphasizing the urgency of the situation. Still appearing entirely bemused, the butler nodded and then turned on his heel, marching swiftly down the hallway so that he might instruct the staff to do as Samuel asked. Samuel, being left to stand in the hallway, now found himself at a loss as to what to do. He could not simply make his way to his study, pour himself a glass of brandy, and sip it carefully, as he had intended. The guilt that had first placed itself on his shoulders when he had seen the boy lying prostrate now seemed to increase tenfold, leaving Samuel feeling almost breathless with the horror of what had taken place.

Dropping his head into his hands, Samuel let out a long, loud groan that echoed up through the hallway and seemed to fill the house. All the delight and expectation that had filled him as he had first made his way into London seemed no more than a dream. Now he felt naught but worry and dread, terrified that the child would die, and he would be left with the burden of guilt and responsibility over what had occurred.

*Why did I not just give him a coin?*

"Do excuse me."

A gentle voice broke into his thoughts and Samuel looked up in surprise as a young lady stepped over the threshold.

"Ah." She smiled briefly, then tipped her head to one side,

regarding him. Samuel said nothing, barely able to take in what was occurring and slowly realizing that he had never once met this young lady before.

“Does your master know that you are dressed so poorly?” Her eyebrows lifted and her eyes narrowed just a little. “And is he also aware that you have left his horse standing, without guard or consideration, in the middle of the street?”

Samuel could not find the words to speak. Instead, he simply stared at the young lady in complete confusion, wondering what it was she had thought to do in coming here in such a fashion. “I—I beg your pardon?”

“His horse,” the lady replied firmly. “It has been left to wander outside the front door and is disrupting many. I am certain that your master will be *most* displeased when he discovers this.”

At that very moment, the butler’s footsteps began to sound, and Samuel turned his head away from the lady. At the same time, she let out a soft yelp of surprise as the door was once more pushed open and the short, stocky man appeared. He was still carrying the child, Samuel noted, although perhaps with not as much gentleness as Samuel had anticipated.

“Where am I to put him, sir?”

Samuel gave himself a slight shake, seeing how the young lady’s eyes turned from him to the man and then to the child. The butler now came to stand next to Samuel, glancing at him for a moment and perhaps expecting that Samuel himself would answer.

For whatever reason, the correct words would not come into Samuel’s mind. He wanted to tell the young lady that he was not, in fact, a poorly dressed footman but that he appreciated her coming to inform them about his horse. He had leapt from it without a second thought, had not told any of his staff to take care of the creature. At the same time, he wanted to instruct the man carrying the small boy to follow the butler below stairs where he would be given his dues once he had placed the child down carefully—but still, nothing came from his lips.

“This way, if you please.” Peters stepped forward, taking on his duties without difficulty. “There is a room prepared for the boy below stairs. Lord Coatbridge has also instructed me to pay you for your trouble. If you come this way.”

The man grunted and moved forward, leaving Samuel and the young lady staring back at each other, each a little overcome in



their own way. The lady's cheeks flared hot with embarrassment, and after a murmur of what Samuel assumed was either apology or confusion, she turned and hurried out of the room.

Samuel wanted to do nothing more than to sink into a chair and close his eyes. The footmen had gone to take care of his horse and he had sent them to prepare a room, forgetting entirely about the creature. Little wonder the lady had come to speak to him when he had left such a thing unattended. But now was not the time for such thoughts. Samuel knew that the doctor would be present very soon, and then he might be able to know what exactly was wrong with the boy. Silently, he prayed that the child would recover—although what he was supposed to do with him thereafter, Samuel did not know.

*Just who was that young woman?*

She had been very bold indeed, he had to admit as he looked at the space that she had occupied only a few moments ago. And then, with a deep sigh, Samuel turned and made his way slowly down the hallway towards his study. It was time, at last, for a little respite.

## 2

Violet did not laugh. Her sister was still very much amused by what had taken place the previous afternoon when they had been out walking, whilst she herself was desperate to forget it had ever occurred. To have come across a horse in the middle of a street when they were attempting to walk was one thing, but to go into the townhouse of an unknown gentleman and, in doing so, refer to him as though he were a servant in Lord Coatbridge's household was quite another. Violet had never been so embarrassed and had practically fled from the house the moment she realized her blunder. In all fairness, the gentleman had not been correctly dressed, was somewhat disheveled, and had been standing by the front door without anyone else around him. It was understandable, surely, that she had considered him one of Lord Coatbridge's staff.

"What will you do when you next see Lord Coatbridge?" Lady Mary asked, her eyes bright with laughter. "You have not been properly introduced to him as yet, which means that you will be required to curtsy and pretend that you have never set eyes on him before in your life."

"I will be civil," Violet replied tightly, no smile gracing her lips. "There is nothing I need to fear."

Miss Kettering and Miss Walters, who had joined Violet and Lady Mary for an afternoon stroll in the park, both sent her a sympathetic look. They had not joined in with Lady Mary's laughter, but Violet had not missed the somewhat rueful smiles that had been sent in Violet's direction. Clearly, her friends were being as sympathetic as they could, understanding her embarrassment whilst trying their utmost to keep any laughter or the like to themselves.

"If you had only listened to me and had chosen *not* to enter the townhouse without invitation, then you might have been spared this mortification," Lady Mary said cheerfully. "I must confess that I am very much looking forward to when we are introduced to Lord Coatbridge, for I cannot imagine the expression that will be on his face when he realizes where he has seen you before."

“That is enough, Mary.” Violet’s eyes were hard as she shot a look to her sister, telling her silently that she had endured more than enough of Mary’s teasing remarks, but her sister paid her no heed. Instead, she simply laughed aloud again, whilst Violet let out a slow breath, determined to keep her temper.

Mary was right, however, which made matters all the worse. If she had listened to Mary and remained on the street rather than insisting she enter the townhouse and demand that the horse be taken care of, then she would not be in this humiliating circumstance at present. It had been a very odd situation, of course, for the horse had been standing directly in front of the townhouse, without any sign of anyone coming to care for it. It was in their direct path, and whilst other passersby were clearly frustrated by it—and certainly confused as to why it was entirely alone—no one had done anything about it. Violet was not the sort of lady who simply stood back and waited for someone to do something in any given situation, not when she herself could take action, and thus, she had walked into the townhouse without giving it a second thought.

Lord Coatbridge, as she now knew him to be, had simply stared at her when she had addressed him. Most likely, he was horrified that she had behaved in such an unladylike manner and had been all the more stunned when she had spoken to him as though he were a mere footman. Quite what had occurred thereafter Violet could not be sure, what with the somewhat pungent man coming into the house without hesitation, holding a child in his arms. She had not lingered, not wanting to ask about the child or the circumstances, given that neither were any of her business. Having made her escape, Violet had then been forced to endure not only her own embarrassment but the teasing of her sister, who was clearly enjoying the situation immensely.

“Might I ask,” Miss Kelling began, breaking the quiet that had settled over the group, “did Lady Lydia speak to you all about the Duke of Claverhouse?” There was a cautiousness in her voice that spoke of uncertainty, perhaps aware that they had made a pact not to mention the Duke amongst themselves given the potential ill feeling that might come from such a thing should the Duke favor one friend over the others.

“Violet and I have discussed what Lydia told us,” Lady Mary replied before Violet could say anything. “Violet would prefer that

we continue our arrangement and not speak of the Duke.”

“But why should you wish for such a thing?” Miss Walters asked, speaking with a frankness that came from being family to both Violet and Lady Mary. “I do not understand your reasons, Cousin. The Duke of Claverhouse is not the gentleman we believed him to be, it seems.” Her brow furrowed and she looked out across the park, as though hoping to set eyes upon that very gentleman. “Society thinks him wonderful and, had it not been for Lydia warning us otherwise, I do not think that any of us would have been aware of it.”

Violet did not have any real wish to explain but, given that her friend and her cousin were both looking at her with curiosity in their expressions, she waved a hand and sighed heavily. “It is only because I believe the Duke might regret what he has done,” she said simply. “I am willing to hope that his character has improved somewhat.”

A most unladylike snort came from Miss Walters. “You mean to say that you believe he has become a good deal more gentlemanlike in only a few weeks?” she asked, making Violet’s cheeks flush with heat as she heard the ridiculousness of her own statement being spoken back to her. “That is something that I *certainly* should not consider, Violet.”

“Whereas I might,” Violet retorted, a little more sharply than she had intended. “I believe that anyone can change, and should the Duke behave in a manner that shows he has done so, then why should I shrink back from such a connection?” She knew that she was being a trifle foolish, for she had to admit that there was very little wisdom in thinking that a gentleman might change their character so soon, but Violet still found herself clinging to a small thread of hope. Quite often, there came a thought of what it might be to be called the Duchess of Claverhouse and, try as she might, Violet could not remove such a thought from herself. There was an eagerness there within her heart, almost an excitement that such a thing could, perhaps, come to pass—but then she would give herself a shake and remind herself that she was being very foolish indeed.

“If you do not wish to speak of the Duke, then I have no difficulty in agreeing,” Miss Kelling murmured, clearly eager to keep the peace between them all. “Besides which, there are plenty of other gentlemen to speak of, I am sure.” She laughed and the others immediately began to talk about Lord Grimsby, who, only

three days ago, had announced his engagement to a lady who had been widowed twice over. Their conversation washed over Violet for, whilst she was a little intrigued by what had taken place, it was nothing in comparison to her own multiplying thoughts.

*Just because Lydia did not find a happy match with the Duke of Claverhouse does not mean that I could not*, she thought to herself, knowing that the Duke was already acquainted with her and had, she was sure, allowed his gaze to linger on her for a few moments. *Yes, he behaved badly but surely that does not mean his entire soul is riddled with darkness.* One shoulder lifted in a half-shrug as she continued to walk, her eyes set on the path before her. *Perhaps he has learned from his mistakes and does not wish to behave so again.*

“Good afternoon, Lady Mary.”

Violet stopped suddenly, her feet kicking up the dust as she tried to catch herself and regain her balance as none other than the Duke of Claverhouse’s voice reached her ears.

“And Miss Kelling, Miss Walters,” the Duke continued as Violet’s eyes slowly rose to meet his. He was smiling at her, his blue eyes bright and alive with energy. “And Lady Violet. Good afternoon.”

Sinking into a curtsy, Violet fought to salvage her composure. She had practically skidded to a stop in front of him and now must appear a little discomposed. Forcing a smile to her face, she lifted her head and tilted it just a little, in what she hoped would appear to be a coy manner. “Good afternoon, Your Grace,” she said quietly, as the others murmured the same. “You are taking the air this fine afternoon?”

The Duke nodded, although Violet was aware of how his eyes drifted from one lady to the next in something of an uncertain manner. It was as though he was not quite sure as to whether or not his company would be welcomed, perhaps realizing that Lady Lydia had spoken to them all of what had taken place between them.

“I am,” he said after a few moments. His smile had slipped just a little as Lady Mary, Miss Kelling, and Miss Walters remained tight-lipped, having made certain of their greeting and then choosing to remain silent thereafter. “It is a fine day.”

“Indeed it is.” Their conversation now became stilted, and Violet grew a little embarrassed, wishing that her sister, at least, would think of something to say to the Duke. She cleared her throat gently and cast a quick glance towards Lady Mary but found her sister staring doggedly at the Duke of Claverhouse, her eyes a trifle

narrowed.

"There is a ball this evening, Your Grace," she said suddenly, finally hitting upon something she might talk of with him. "Are you to be in attendance?"

Looking back at her, the Duke grinned. "There are four balls this evening, Lady Violet," he told her, his eyes twinkling. "I have been invited to all four and thus do not know to which one you are referring."

"I see." Violet tried to smile but inwardly felt herself a little embarrassed. "We are to attend Lord Marchingham's ball this evening." She gestured to her companions. "All four of us."

"Capital," the Duke said, his eyes now a little wider with a broad smile crossing his lips. "That is the very one I have chosen to attend. It will be a very pleasant evening, I am sure."

She nodded, wishing that one of the others would say something. "We will be glad to see you there, Your Grace," she said, not quite aware of how Miss Kelling, Miss Walters, and her sister all frowned hard, clearly disagreeing with Violet's words. "I am certain that Lord Marchingham will be greatly pleased with your attendance at *his* ball over the others that you were invited to."

The Duke chuckled, turning to face her a little more as though he realized that he would get no conversation from the other three. "That is most kind of you to say, Lady Violet," he replied, giving her a small bow of appreciation. "Might I ask if you would be willing to save a dance for me? The country dance, mayhap? Or the cotillion?"

Violet felt herself flushing, only for the words of Lydia to come back into her mind.

*The Duke may be charming, but there is a snake hiding underneath that exterior.*

"I—I should be glad to," she stammered, now feeling as though she were torn between accepting the Duke's offer and refusing him, due to Lydia's warnings. "Thank you, Your Grace."

He beamed at her, and after a few more minutes of somewhat banal conversation based solely around Lord Grimsby and his bride-to-be, the Duke finally took his leave. Violet curtsied again and then forced herself to continue walking, not certain what she felt or what her friends would now say, given her acceptance of the Duke's request for a dance.

"Well."

Lady Mary was the first to speak, casting a sharp eye towards Violet, her brow arching. "The Duke appears to be seeking you out, my dear sister."

"That is nonsense," Violet replied firmly. "We have all danced with the Duke at prior balls. You need not make it more than it is."

"Surely you will not forget Lydia's warnings simply because a handsome duke has begged you for a dance," her sister said, now appearing to be a little more angry rather than upset. "I know that the *ton* is seeking his company at almost every turn, but we are surely wiser than that, Violet."

Violet stopped walking, planted both hands on her hips, and, with a lift to her chin, turned to face her sister.

"Mary," she said firmly, ignoring Miss Kelling and Miss Walters, who both appeared embarrassed to be stuck in the middle between two arguing sisters. "I heard everything Lydia told us. She did not go into particular detail, but I understand that the Duke behaved very poorly towards her, and that as a consequence, she now seeks to warn us all about his true nature. I agree that his acquaintance and his company is something that we must all be very careful about, but pray, credit me with some wisdom. I have accepted a dance because it would have been very rude indeed not to do so. He has not asked to court me or anything akin to that and yet you behave as though a single dance will lead to my downfall." She rolled her eyes and sighed heavily. "It is not as bad as all that and you need not go on behaving so." Seeing Lady Mary about to open her mouth again, Violet threw up her hands. "I distinctly stated that I did not want to discuss the Duke of Claverhouse any longer, Mary," she said as Lady Mary's cheeks began to go red. "I ask that you refrain from mentioning him again, and allow me to behave as I see fit."

So saying, she turned on her heel and continued to walk along the path through the park, leaving her friends and her sister to trail behind her. A sense of defiance clouded her spirit, and as her hands slowly began to curl into fists, Violet scowled hard. Her sister was not going to tell her what she could or could not do when it came to the Duke of Claverhouse. Violet was very well able to make such a decision herself, and she prayed that Mary would listen and accept that she would not speak of him again. Besides which, she told herself, there would not be anything of significance coming from a mere dance.

Making her way rather hurriedly along the path, she rounded a somewhat sharp corner, only to walk directly into the path of another person. Having had her head down and her angry gaze fixed on the path, she had not even glimpsed the person she now staggered away from, a small yelp of surprise and pain escaping from her lips.

“Do excuse me.”

A strong hand caught her arm and pulled her upright, only for Violet to lose her balance yet again and, this time, tumble forward. Her bonnet struck the gentleman square across the face, making it tip back from her head and sending it askew—and much to her embarrassment, ruining her fair blonde curls. The astonished cries of her sister and friends sounded around her ears as the gentleman held both her arms tightly, finally managing to set her back on her feet. Her foot was throbbing from where the gentleman had stepped on it, her arm aching from where he had held onto her so very tightly.

“I beg your pardon,” she gasped, her breathing ragged as she looked up into the face of none other than the gentleman she knew now to be Lord Coatbridge.

If Violet had been able to do so, she would have shrunk into the foliage that surrounded them and hidden herself from Lord Coatbridge’s gaze. The sheer mortification that now poured into every single part of her was almost beyond endurance, and she immediately dropped her gaze, fully aware of just how hot her face was becoming.

“It was naught but my fault entirely,” Lord Coatbridge told her, clearing his throat as he slowly released her, as though afraid she might fall down once more. “I should have been watching where I was going a good deal more carefully.”

Violet could not reply. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth, and she turned away, lifting her hands to her head so that she might attempt to sort her bonnet. Her sister was there immediately to aid her, untying the ribbons and gently lifting it from Violet’s head so that she might set it right again.

“Might I beg to know the name of the lady I have so injured?” Lord Coatbridge asked as Violet felt her arm taken by her sister in evidence of her support. “I am horrified to have harmed you, and you must accept my most fervent apologies.”

Shaking her head, Violet finally allowed herself to look back at



Lord Coatbridge, only to see his eyes flare wide as he realized precisely who she was. Violet once more wanted to shrink away, but with a gentle press from her sister's hand to her arm, she forced herself to speak.

"It was not your doing at all, Lord Coatbridge," she stated, making it more than apparent that she already knew who he was. "I had my gaze fixed to the path and was not even aware of your presence." Another meek glance up to his face made her cheeks glow with embarrassment as she realized she had not answered his question. "I am Lady Violet, my lord," she added hastily. "My sister, Lady Mary. My cousin, Miss Sarah Walters, and my friend, Miss Elizabeth Kettering."

Lord Coatbridge collected himself quickly and bowed low. "I am very glad to make your acquaintance, ladies."

Violet allowed herself a few moments to scrutinize him, keeping her eyes low and ready to dart away at any time. Her cousin, Miss Walters, was attempting to make genial conversation and was distracting Lord Coatbridge from Violet's scrutiny. He was not an overly tall gentleman, but with broad shoulders and a strong back. He had a somewhat severe look—although, she considered, that might have been only due to the present circumstances—with hazel eyes, a long, straight nose, and a firm jawline that held a pair of wide lips that were pulled in a solid line. His outfit was carefully arranged with nothing at all out of place, making him appear both fastidious, and yet in the same way, everything a gentleman ought to be. For a moment, Violet wondered whether or not his expression would change should he smile, but in the next moment, his eyes fastened to hers once more, and she immediately dropped her gaze again.

"I shall not hinder you all any longer," Lord Coatbridge said, sounding quite calm and collected, as though there had not been anything at all to concern him during their meeting. "I shall be at the very same ball this evening, Miss Walters," he said, responding to the conversation they were having. "I will undoubtedly come to seek each of you out for a dance, should you have me." A tiny, flickering smile darted across his lips as he bowed, making Violet blush furiously as his eyes caught hers once more. "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," she murmured, bobbing her curtsy before lifting her head, although she did not permit herself to look at the

gentleman as he passed. Her face was still glowing with embarrassment, and she felt as though she might do something even more foolish should she even so much as glance at him as he passed.

“Are you all right, Violet?”

Violet, who had been expecting mirth from her sister, looked with surprise into Lady Mary’s eyes and saw nothing but grave concern resting in her expression. “I—I am quite well, I assure you,” she said as Mary pressed her arm in a gentle expression of concern. “That was most embarrassing.”

“Lord Coatbridge is too much of a gentleman to make anything much of it,” Mary said as Miss Walters and Miss Kelling nodded. “Come now, we should return home. You will need to rest before we prepare for this evening.”

The ball now loomed before Violet as a great, threatening creature. She would be forced to acknowledge Lord Coatbridge once more, and pray that on her third attempt, she would not make such a poor impression of herself. Pasting a slightly wary smile on her face, she nodded to her sister and, together, the four ladies turned around to make for home.

### 3

Taking a deep breath, Samuel felt a broad smile settle on his face as he stepped into the ballroom. Everything around him seemed to flow with light and sound and color, making his heart lift with nothing other than sheer delight. His eyes could not help but fix on some of the debutantes that stood near to him, for there were a good many beauties present this Season. Samuel had to admit that he was certainly willing to consider matrimony, for it was both necessary for him to do and a slowly growing desire within his own soul to no longer spend his life alone. He had done all he could to restore his estate and, in achieving that, now felt able to bring a wife home with him so that they might continue on the family line. His smile spread as he saw first one lovely young lady and then another, thinking quietly to himself that he was in a very remarkable situation indeed. There were a good many for him to choose, and thus, he could spend the Season dancing with, conversing with, and taking tea with as many delightful young ladies as he wished. After all, there was no great rush for him to settle upon just one. He would be able to take his time and enjoy himself in the process.

“Good gracious, can it be you?”

An oddly familiar voice graced Samuel’s ears, and he turned his head sharply, only for his eyes to flare wide as he threw up both hands in astonishment. “Claverhouse!”

The Duke of Claverhouse chuckled and reached to slap Samuel on the shoulder before they shook hands firmly. “The very same,” he grinned as Samuel beamed at him in return. “It has been some years, has it not?”

“Indeed it has,” Samuel replied, having to speak a little more loudly due to the hubbub that surrounded him. “I was about to refer to you as Sotherby, only to recall that you have now taken on the highest title in the land.”

Again, the Duke laughed. “Highest save for the king,” he reminded Samuel, who chuckled in response. “But yes, I am, unfortunately, now the Duke of Claverhouse.” He gave Samuel a

mock bow. "And surrounded by a good many of the *ton* who, for some reason, want to continually be in my company."

Samuel laughed again and shook his head, seeing the wry smile on the Duke's face and knowing full well that his friend was merely teasing. No doubt the Duke was more than delighted to be so eagerly sought after by those in the *ton*, for as much as Samuel appreciated his friend's company, he knew that the Duke's character was one that was inclined towards arrogance. They had first met in Eton, being trained under the masters and finding themselves less than inclined towards their studies. Having formed a strong friendship, it had been some years since Samuel had been in the Duke's company, for he himself had been on the continent and, thereafter, dealing with the loss of his father and all that his new responsibilities now entailed.

"I was sorry to hear about the loss of your father," the Duke said, his expression becoming more serious. "That must have been very painful for you."

"Something I am sure that you fully understand," Samuel replied, not wanting to talk about all that he now felt over the loss of his father. There was a sadness there, certainly, but there had also been a touch of relief that he was now able to deal with the estate in the way that it had required. "I have had to pull the estate from the brink of ruin, truth be told, but things are much improved now."

Something shifted in the Duke's expression—something that Samuel could not quite make out—but the next instant, it was gone and replaced with a warm smile.

"I am certain that you have done everything well, old friend," the Duke told him, making Samuel smile. "I am certain that the estate will turn out to be very profitable indeed."

"I must hope so."

"Which is why," the Duke continued with a broad grin, "you are now in London for the Season." His eyebrows waggled in a comical manner, making Samuel laugh a little self-consciously. "You are here to find a pretty young lady to make your wife, are you not?"

Samuel spread his hands. "I am here merely to enjoy the Season, as you are," he replied, chuckling. "If I should find a young lady that *particularly* captures my attention, then I may have no other choice but to consider courting her."

The Duke laughed aloud, catching the attention of one or two of

the other guests, although he did not seem to either notice or care. "A very wise consideration, my dear friend," he replied, his blue eyes twinkling. "I will admit that I am in much the same position, although it would be a *trifle* unfair to the many young ladies who have not yet been introduced to me if I were to take a wife so soon."

This remark did not sit well on Samuel's heart, but he threw it aside quickly enough, reminding himself silently that his friend had always been inclined towards thinking rather highly of himself. Samuel supposed that the Duke had a right to do so, for he was not only favored with handsome looks and a good deal of wealth, but had the highest title amongst society—save for the prince regent and the King himself. Little wonder that the Duke wished to soak up as much attention as he could from the *ton*.

"I am very glad indeed to be back amongst society, even though I confess that the first few days have not been at all as I expected," Samuel replied, gesturing for a footman to bring them both a glass of brandy. "I have had a young lady walk directly into my path, with her bonnet almost breaking my cheekbone," he gestured to the slightly faded bruise to the right of his face, knowing that he was exaggerating what had occurred but seeing the Duke's interest, nonetheless. "In addition, I have been referred to as a footman in my own home, even though I am the master of it, and had to take a small, injured child into the servants' quarters until he is recovered from an injury that was entirely his own doing." This last remark brought with it a small swirl of guilt, but Samuel pushed it aside as best he could. He did not want to admit to his friend that he was in any way responsible for what had happened to the child, even though he knew that he had brought it about.

"You have a child in your home?" the Duke asked, his eyes a little wide as Samuel sighed and nodded. "Whatever happened?"

Briefly, Samuel explained what had occurred, only for the Duke to wave a hand in evident dismissal of what Samuel had done.

"You are much too good-natured, my friend," the Duke said firmly. "That boy would have been quite all right had you let him alone. No doubt *someone* would have come along to take care of him. It was not your responsibility, although I have no doubt that you feel it very much to be so." He eyed Samuel shrewdly, but Samuel did not say a word, leaving the Duke to sigh in evident exasperation. "Regardless, I am much more interested in why you

were spoken to as a footman rather than as master of your own home.” he continued, making Samuel chuckle. “That is most extraordinary.”

Samuel was just about to explain what had taken place, only for the Duke to suddenly grasp his arm. Looking into his friend’s face, Samuel saw the Duke’s gaze traveling towards someone just behind him and thus, he turned slowly and set his eyes upon the young lady in question.

His breath caught. It was none other than Lady Violet, the one who had not only thought him a servant but who had walked into him abruptly in the middle of Hyde Park.

“Do you see her?”

Samuel cleared his throat, ignoring the slight flicker of interest that began to whirl its way through his heart. “Which young lady, Your Grace?” he asked as the Duke threw him an exasperated look. “I cannot tell, given that there are so many.”

“*That* one,” the Duke said, emphasizing the first word as though that would help Samuel to pick her out. “She is Lady Violet. Her eyes are just as her name, *and* she is the daughter of the Earl of Arrington.”

Considering this for a moment, Samuel shrugged one shoulder. “I am sure she is lovely,” he replied, choosing not to tell the Duke what had occurred between them thus far. “Is she anyone of significance?”

The Duke of Claverhouse turned his gaze away from the lady for a moment and fixed it instead upon Samuel. “I have asked her expressly to save me a dance,” he said, surprising Samuel all the more. “I am certain she will have done so.”

Blinking a little more quickly, Samuel took in what this meant. “Then you are interested in her acquaintance?”

“I have every intention of forming a connection with her, certainly,” the Duke replied, although he did not express what that particularly meant. “That is all.”

“I see.” Clearing his throat, Samuel gestured to her. “Might we go and converse with the lady, then?” he asked, wondering just how she would react upon seeing him again. “If she has saved you a dance, then I expect she would be glad for you to write your name upon her dance card.” He spoke with the same, easy familiarity that came from their friendship, not required to refer to the Duke with the same etiquette and manner as others. Waiting patiently, Samuel

eventually saw the Duke nod, and after a moment, they stepped forward. Together, they made their way towards where Lady Violet stood, and as Samuel watched her, he saw the moment that she recognized their approach.

Lady Violet was certainly a remarkably beautiful young lady, Samuel had to admit. She was a little shorter than he but with a willowy figure that he could not help but admire. Her hair was like a golden waterfall as it cascaded down her back, with a few gentle curls around the corners of her temples. Samuel had to admit that he could not recall what the color of her eyes were, but were they anything like the Duke had stated, then Samuel was certain they would be very lovely. Her high cheekbones and delicate porcelain skin made her appear every inch the refined young lady, although Samuel recalled he had not yet seen her smile. Would her eyes glow with happiness when she did so? Would her face flush with delight?

*Why should it matter to you how she appears?*

Samuel gave himself an inner shake, reminding himself forcibly that the Duke himself had only just now expressed an interest in the lady which Samuel himself could not deny. It would not be right to even consider a lady after his friend had so obviously and pertinently expressed an interest. Yes, the connection might come to naught and yes, there might not be even the smallest hint of regard from the lady herself, but Samuel would not even permit himself to think on her overlong, given the Duke's already obvious preference.

"Good evening, Lady Violet, Lady Mary."

The Duke bowed low, and Samuel followed suit, making certain to first look at Lady Mary and then to Lady Violet.

"Good evening, Your Grace," they both murmured, before looking towards Samuel. "Good evening, Lord Coatbridge."

"Good evening," he replied, before realizing that he had nothing else with which to continue on the conversation. His brow furrowed and he cleared his throat, glancing up at the Duke and praying that he had something more to say. Quite why he had not been able to think of even a single thing to speak of in this present situation was very confusing indeed, for he was normally able to speak pleasantly to anyone.

Lady Violet's eyes darted up to his as the Duke immediately began to speak on what a wonderful ball this was and just how much he hoped that the ladies were all enjoying the evening. Samuel held her gaze for some moments, realizing that her eyes

were just as the Duke had described them. It felt as though a heavy weight had plunged into his stomach as he took in the blue and purple hues, realizing that he had never seen anything so extraordinary in his life before.

*She is an angel.*

His mouth quirked.

*A clumsy angel.*

Upon seeing the way his lips curved, Lady Violet instantly dropped her gaze and Samuel opened his mouth to protest, to explain that he had not been seeking to embarrass her in any way, only for the Duke to pre-empt him.

“My *dear* Lady Violet, I come in the hope that you have recalled my request and have not yet permitted the other gentlemen of the *ton* to steal all of your dances from you,” he said, making Lady Violet blush furiously. “You have not forgotten, I hope?”

“I could not forget, Your Grace,” came the quick reply as the lady slipped off her dance card and handed it to the Duke. “I would not have done such a thing.”

The Duke grinned at her, and Samuel saw the way her cheeks colored, realizing that the Duke’s presence alone was making the lady a little more flustered than usual. It was as if someone had reached in and squeezed his heart in a most painful manner, reminding him that, whenever the Duke was present, he would be considered a good deal lesser than he. This was not something that Samuel had ever even considered before. Now that he stood beside his friend, fully aware of just how insignificant he appeared to the ladies of the *ton* now that the Duke of Claverhouse was nearby, Samuel felt the first unsettling twinges of jealousy grow within his heart.

“Lady Mary,” he said, somewhat abruptly. “Might you care to dance?” He beamed at her and held out his hand, praying that she would accept him. “I should be glad to take one of your dances, if you have any free.”

The lady, much to Samuel’s relief, was more than glad to accept his offer and quickly handed over her dance card. The feelings of jealousy were quickly pushed aside as Samuel wrote his name down for the country dance, before seeing the Duke return Lady Violet’s card to her also.

*I should ask Lady Violet to dance.*

The quiet voice within him was not one that could be easily



ignored. It was the correct thing for a gentleman to do in this situation, for he could not ask one lady to dance and overlook the other, not when both had their dance cards out and ready for his perusal. Fully expecting the Duke to ask Lady Mary to dance, he cleared his throat and, without being aware of why he did so, gave Lady Violet a small, sharp bow.

“Lady Violet?” he asked, a little embarrassed at his own conduct as he rose from his bow. “Might I ask if you also could spare me a dance?” He smiled as warmly as he could and waited for her to respond, seeing the surprise that leapt into her face which, much to his chagrin, immediately turned into uncertainty. “I promise you, I shall not stand on your toes,” he added, as though this might encourage her to accept him.

Samuel winced inwardly as Lady Violet took some time before she answered, her eyes darting to the right and then to the left, as though she did not want to look him full in the face.

“I—I...” She trailed off, only to lift her head, straighten her shoulders and look him full in the face. “I would be very honored, Lord Coatbridge,” she stated, her voice a good deal firmer than before. “I must also beg an apology from you before you do so, given my poor conduct of late.”

Samuel saw the desperate look in her eyes which betrayed a fear that he would not forgive her for what she had done when she had referred to him as though he were a footman. Perhaps she feared that he had only asked for her dance card because he ought to do so, rather than because he truly wished to, and in that regard, had been uncertain as to whether or not to accept.

“Pray, do not trouble yourself any longer, Lady Violet,” he said quickly, ignoring the Duke’s interested look. “It is all right. Indeed, it is entirely understandable.” Seeing the way her shoulders sagged in relief, he held out his hand and dipped his head once more, praying that it would set her at ease. “Might I have your dance card, Lady Violet?”

“But of course, Lord Coatbridge.” Lady Violet’s voice was a little breathless, and Samuel did not miss the way her hand trembled as she held out the card for him to take. “You are very kind.”

Samuel signed his name quickly for the quadrille, noting with interest that the Duke had secured both the cotillion and the supper dance. It seemed that the Duke of Claverhouse was somewhat captivated with Lady Violet, which, much to Samuel’s

disappointment, told him that he could not even think of the lady in such a manner any longer, not when the Duke himself had expressed a singular interest.

“Thank you, Lord Coatbridge.”

“I believe it is our dance, Lady Violet.”

The Duke moved forward just as Samuel handed back the dance card to the lady, pulling her away from her conversation with Samuel in an instant.

“It is the cotillion, is it not?”

Lady Violet looked up at the Duke in confusion, perhaps a little overwhelmed by his buoyancy and delight, only for that to be replaced with a warm smile. “But of course, Your Grace,” she said as the Duke chuckled and offered her his arm. “The cotillion. It came around so soon that I did not expect it.”

Why Samuel expected the lady to throw him a final glance as she stepped out with the Duke, he did not know. What astonished him was the kick of disappointment in his chest when she did *not* do so. Instead, he was left to stand with Lady Mary, who was also watching the two leave for the dance floor. Samuel made to say something, only to note the frown that now pulled at Lady Mary’s expression.

Was she displeased with her sister’s behavior? Had she thought that Lady Violet ought not to have accepted Samuel’s invitation to dance? Slowly, Samuel realized that he had not seen the Duke ask Lady Mary for her dance card. When Samuel had been in conversation with Lady Violet, Lady Mary had stood quietly by her side and had not been spoken to by anyone—including the Duke himself. The gentleman ought to have asked Lady Mary for a dance also, he realized, but in choosing not to do so, had made his preference clear. His expression lifted. Most likely, Lady Mary was a little jealous that her sister had caught the Duke’s attention. That was most understandable, for why would a young lady *not* be so, given that most of the *ton* wished for the Duke’s company?

“My dear?”

He started, pulled from his own thoughts to see an older lady approaching them both, stopping just a step or two away from them and putting one hand out towards Lady Mary.

“Your sister has gone to dance,” she said, making Samuel quickly aware as to who she was. “And you are standing here alone.”

“Not quite alone, Mama,” Lady Mary said quickly. “Forgive me, I should have come to find you at once.” Casting a quick glance towards Samuel, she gave him a small smile. “If you would permit me to introduce you, Lord Coatbridge, I should like very much to introduce you to my mother.”

“But of course,” Samuel replied, turning his attention away from the dance floor and fixing it upon Lady Mary’s mother. For the time being, this was all that was required of him, and he did not need to think on Lady Violet any longer.

# 4

“It is so *very* kind of you to call, Your Grace.”

Violet prayed that her mother would stop speaking in such a deferential manner, finding herself a little embarrassed that she was so obvious in her obsequiousness. Yes, it meant a great deal that the Duke of Claverhouse had called upon them, but there was no need to make their interest in him so very apparent.

*He may well have more to his character than you are aware*, she reminded herself, recalling precisely what Lady Lydia had told her. This, of course, was still battling against her own sense of pride that the Duke of Claverhouse appeared to be so very interested in forming a strong acquaintance with her, and thus, Violet found herself to be in something of a struggle. She had been all too aware of just how many members of the *ton* were watching as she danced not only one, but two dances with the Duke, with the latter being the supper dance, which had then led them to sit together for a small repast. Of course, her mother had been in a state of exaltation since that moment, convinced now that the Duke of Claverhouse had every intention of securing her daughter as his bride.

“It is a *very* fine afternoon, is it not?” the Duke said loudly, looking at Violet with a small smile tugging at one side of his mouth and giving her a charming, boyish look. “What a pity it is to be sitting about indoors when it is such a pleasant day out of doors.”

“Then you must, of course, go to enjoy it, Your Grace,” Lady Arrington said, giving Violet a pointed look. “We should not like to detain you.”

Violet was not at all certain what her mother now expected from her. It surely could not be that she thought Violet ought to suggest that she walk out with the Duke for a time, for that would be not only improper but very rude indeed. They had to remain at home for the moment due to the fact that it was time for afternoon calls, and Violet could not know for certain as to whether other gentlemen might seek to visit. After all, she had a sister and a cousin present also, and gentlemen of the *ton* might want to call

upon either Lady Mary or Miss Walters and they could not do so if they were absent from the house.

"That is most gracious of you, Lady Arrington," came the warm reply as the Duke spread his hands. "But, alas, I should be without any good company and that would only detract from the joy that such a fine afternoon would bring. Therefore, I am resigned to the fact that I shall remain indoors with you all for the present, for I would prefer to have excellent company than enjoy the afternoon air." He smiled jovially but it appeared that this did not please Lady Arrington, for she frowned hard, and her smile faded away at once.

"That will not do, Your Grace," she said, shaking her head. "There must be a way whereby you are able to enjoy both." She gestured to Violet, who, upon seeing this, immediately widened her eyes and gave a small shake of her head, which, of course, her mother ignored entirely.

"Why do you not walk with my daughters for a time?" she suggested as the Duke of Claverhouse began to smile and nod his head, clearly eager to pounce upon any such suggestion. "I will send a maid with them also, of course, but to walk with two such young ladies together will be suitable. I must remain here with my niece, for I am certain there will be other callers today."

"A capital idea!" The Duke slapped his knee in evident delight and immediately rose, unaware of Violet's concern and disinclination. Instead, it seemed that he assumed that both she and Lady Mary would be quite agreeable to the notion. "I will wait for you both at the front of the house, for I know that you will need to fetch shawls and the like." Beaming at Violet, he then gave Lady Arrington a quick bow and hurried from the room in eager expectation of them following.

"Mama," Violet began, only for Lady Arrington to hold up one hand, palm towards Violet.

"I will hear no argument, Violet," she said as Lady Mary also began to protest. "The Duke has favored you, and you must do all you can to secure him."

Violet bit her lip, aware that there was certainly an inclination towards accepting the Duke's attentions and hoping that it would lead to a connection of significance whilst, at the same time, being reminded of all that her friend had warned her as regarded the gentleman.

"Mary, do be quiet!"

Lady Arrington's voice rang out across the room, silencing Violet's sister and reminding Violet herself of just how commanding a figure her mother could be.

"Walk with the Duke. Enjoy his company and make sure you each take your lady's maid with you." She wagged one finger in Violet's direction. "You must do all you can to make certain of his attentions, my dear," she added. "Refinement, elegance, and gentility. That is all that is required." Her expression changed from a severe look to one of excitement, as though *she* were the one about to walk out with the Duke. "Just think, my dear. You might one day be a duchess."



\* \* \*

"This is not right."

Violet sighed inwardly as she quickly finished changing into her walking dress, leaving the maid to scurry about her as Lady Mary stood in the doorway.

"We ought to remain at home and wait for any other gentlemen that seek to call," Lady Mary continued, sighing deeply as a heaviness played across her features. "I do not wish to be the Duke of Claverhouse's company, but it seems I am to have no choice."

"No," Violet agreed firmly. "You do not. So, it is best that we do not complain or protest, given that there is nothing we can do." Seeing her maid step back, Violet threw herself a quick glance in the mirror and agreed that she looked very well indeed. The maid had worked quickly, and Violet was now ready to step out for a walk with the Duke. As much as she wanted to agree with her sister, as much as she wanted her to protest that she should stay at home with her mother and cousin, there was a part of Violet's heart that was thrilled with the thought of being so favored. Doubts began to creep into her mind as regarded what Lady Lydia had said

of the man. Perhaps there had been a reason for the Duke's behavior, reasons which, as yet, Violet did not know. Or, as she had always expressed to her sister, perhaps the Duke's character had changed significantly from when Lydia had been involved with him. It was a short time, yes, but that did not mean that such a thing could not take place.

"You are glad to be walking out with him."

The accusatory tone in Lady Mary's voice sent a chill through Violet, but she did not reply. Instead, she merely lifted her chin and walked past her sister, leaving Lady Mary to follow after her.

"We are not to talk of the Duke, I know, but—"

"Then pray, do not," Violet interrupted as they made their way to the staircase. "We are taking a walk with him, that is all." She shot a hard look in Lady Mary's direction. "Whether I am glad about it or not, that is what is taking place, and there is nothing that either of us can do about it."

So saying, she quickly began to make her descent down to the hallway, seeing how the Duke's eyes were fixed to her as she did so. It sent a thrill of pleasure into her heart at the way his lips pulled into such a warm smile, only for such a feeling to disappear as another gentleman came into the hallway, greeted swiftly by their butler.

*Lord Coatbridge.*

Her hand stilled on the staircase banister, and it was not until her sister had given her a gentle prod that she began to walk again. She made her way towards the Duke and forced a smile to her face, even though she wanted only to look towards Lord Coatbridge and hastily explain the situation.

"Lady Arrington and Miss Walters are present at home," she heard the butler say as they drew near. "I am sorry, but Lady Violet and Lady Mary are about to quit the house for a short time." The butler's eyes glanced towards Violet, only just becoming aware that they were present. "Do excuse me, my lady," he added hastily. "I did not see you. Lord Coatbridge has arrived, but as I have just informed him, you are about to step out with the Duke of Claverhouse for a short time."

Given the butler's introduction, Violet had no other choice but to look directly at Lord Coatbridge, pasting a quick, apologetic smile on her face as she did so. "Lord Coatbridge," she said, seeing the small, flickering frown that pulled at his brow, "How very good

of you to call.”

The Duke, being taken up in conversation with Lady Mary, did not hear either Violet or Lord Coatbridge as they spoke, although Lord Coatbridge threw him a questioning glance regardless.

“Forgive me,” he said, after a few moments. “I had thought afternoon calls were taking place at present.” He smiled tightly and bowed. “I am clearly mistaken.”

All the more embarrassed, Violet shook her head. “It is as you have said, Lord Coatbridge,” she stammered awkwardly. “Yes, we had intended to stay for afternoon calls, but the Duke has asked if we might join him for a short walk in the park and I...I...” She stopped, unwilling to state outright that her mother had insisted that they join the Duke for such an excursion, but it appeared it was not needed, for Lord Coatbridge merely nodded and sighed, turning away as he did so.

“I will rearrange my visit for another day,” he said, somewhat stiffly. “Good afternoon, Lady Violet.”

Violet stared after him as he left, her eyes fixed to his back until he was gone out of sight. Surely it could not be that he had arranged to call upon them? She had not had any knowledge of it, and she was certain that had Lady Mary known of his intentions, she would have related it to Violet herself also.

*Mama.*

Violet closed her eyes. Her mother must have known of the arrangement and had simply disregarded it in place of the Duke of Claverhouse’s invitation. She did not think she could feel more ashamed.

“Lord Coatbridge has taken his leave, then?”

Her eyes flew open as the Duke’s voice reached her. “Yes, he has departed,” she said swiftly, forcing a smile to her face that she did not feel. “I am surprised that you did not speak to him, Your Grace.”

For a moment, her lighthearted remark seemed to have had the opposite effect on the Duke, for his brow furrowed, his eyes grew a little cold, and the smile that had been on his face seemed to disappear in an instant. Violet blinked in surprise, not quite sure how to respond, only for the Duke to seem to shrug off his affronted state and give her, instead, a halfhearted smile.

“I will see Lord Coatbridge at White’s later,” he told her, as though this made up for his entire disregard of the gentleman.



“Besides which, he will not mind at all if I am caught up in conversation and cannot greet him.” He shrugged one shoulder, but this only made Violet feel all the more uneasy. “I am certain he will be quite content to call upon you both another time.”

Lady Mary and Violet exchanged a glance but there was nothing more to be said. In the next few minutes, the Duke had ushered them both from the house, and with their respective maids behind them, both Violet and Lady Mary began to walk alongside the Duke, who seemed more than delighted with the situation.

Violet, however, did not feel so much at ease. The Duke’s strange lack of consideration or even awareness of Lord Coatbridge had unsettled her. Lord Coatbridge had gestured to the Duke, obviously aware of his presence, but the Duke had remained with his back turned towards Lord Coatbridge, making it plain that he would not turn to speak to the fellow. On top of this, when Violet had made that somewhat flippant remark, the Duke’s expression had changed so terribly that it had made her feel a little afraid. Once more, she was reminded of what Lady Lydia had told them of the Duke’s true character. Despite telling herself that she wanted to believe that a gentleman could change his nature in that regard, Violet found herself beginning to feel somewhat disinclined towards the Duke’s company.

“Ah, Your Grace.”

Violet was forced to stop, realizing that the Duke had been talking for the last few minutes, but that she herself had taken nothing in, having been much too busy with her own considerations. The Duke was already busy conversing with an acquaintance and quickly introduced both herself and Lady Mary. They smiled, curtsied, and greeted the gentleman they now knew to be Lord Johnstone, only to then fall back into silence as the Duke continued to speak without even attempting to draw them into the conversation.

Violet’s shoulders slumped as she stood there in silence, all too aware of how those who walked past them or those who drove past in their carriage or phaeton looked at them so pointedly. Of course, it was most understandable that they should garner interest given that they were with the Duke of Claverhouse, but Violet found herself almost embarrassed to be seen in such a state. To be standing by him was one thing, but to be standing silently, without being encouraged to speak or to enter into the conversation, was

quite another. It was as if she were nothing other than a frippery, placed beside the Duke in order to make him all the more appealing to others. It was not a pleasant sensation, and Violet felt her cheeks grow a little warm as she heard the Duke laugh aloud, realizing just how little consideration he was giving her.

“Come, Mary.”

Her voice was louder than she had intended, but Violet acted before she could think on it any longer. Lifting her chin, she gave Lord Johnstone a sharp nod before she walked directly past both the Duke and him, with Mary coming along quickly beside her. Violet felt anger burn deep within her heart as she began to walk along the pavement, her sister at her side and their maids behind them. The Duke had asked them to walk with him, to share the very pleasant afternoon, and yet, within the first few minutes, had ignored them in much the same way he had ignored Lord Coatbridge. She was not about to tolerate being treated so, not when the Duke had expressly invited them into his company.

“Violet, what are you doing?”

She did not have time to answer, for the very next moment, the Duke himself had called out to them, and within the next few seconds, had drawn near.

“Lady Violet, Lady Mary,” he said, sounding a little out of breath, “are you so bored of my company that you will depart from me already?”

Violet arched one eyebrow as she swung around to face him, the anger still burning deeply within her heart. “I did not think that you would wish to be pulled from your conversation, Your Grace,” she said, a trifle tartly. “However, I found myself unwilling to simply remain standing as a silent observer, not when the day is—as you said yourself—so *very* fine.” Her chin lifted another notch, and she held the Duke’s gaze, seeing his blue eyes become a little icy. “Therefore, if you wish to converse with Lord Johnstone a little more, then pray, do so. But do not expect myself and my sister to remain standing waiting for such a conversation to end.” Her eyes caught sight of a gentleman just behind the Duke, and much to her surprise, she found herself calling out his name. “Lord Coatbridge.”

The gentleman hesitated, seeing the way the Duke half turned towards him, fixing what was not in any way a genuine smile to his lips, then drew near.

“Lady Violet,” he said, bowing. “Lady Mary.” His eyes darted to

the Duke. "Claverhouse."

"Coatbridge," the Duke replied, his tone a little threatening as though he was attempting to force Lord Coatbridge from their conversation. "I did not see you back at the house, although Lady Violet informed me that you were present."

Violet studied Lord Coatbridge's face as the Duke spoke and did not see even an ounce of surprise jump into his expression. Instead, Lord Coatbridge's eyes narrowed just a touch and his brows drew low, perhaps aware that the Duke was not telling the truth.

"But of course," he replied, ever the gentleman. "Now, Lady Violet, was there something you wished from me?" He turned back to her and smiled, although it still did not reach his eyes. Violet could not expect him to be glad of her company, not after all that had been between them. Her poor manners, lack of consideration, and her new embarrassment of having to turn him away from her home due to the Duke's eagerness and her mother's determination would not have encouraged him to further their acquaintance.

"Yes, indeed," she said, not certain where she intended to go with this particular conversation. Why she had called him over, Violet did not know, but perhaps it had been simply to remove some of the tension that now stood between herself and the Duke of Claverhouse. "Given that you were so rudely turned away, Lord Coatbridge, I wondered if you wished to join us for our short walk?" She smiled as warmly as she could, praying silently that he would accept, for fear that she would be forced otherwise to remain solely in the Duke's company. Flashing a quick look at her sister, who appeared quite stunned with all that had taken place, she fixed her gaze back upon Lord Coatbridge. "We would *all* be glad of your company, I am sure," she finished, in what she hoped was an encouraging tone. "Pray, if you will show your forgiveness in joining us, I would be most grateful."

A small spark flickered in Lord Coatbridge's eyes and, the next moment, a broad smile settled on his lips. It was as though he knew precisely what it was she sought, and given his gentlemanly nature, he was now very glad indeed to give it to her.

"There is nothing to forgive, Lady Violet," he said as the Duke folded his arms in what appeared to be a disgruntled fashion. "You were unable to accept my calling upon you, but I am certain I will be able to do so at another time. However," he finished, stepping forward, "I have a few minutes to spare and can certainly walk with

you all.” His brow lifted as he looked directly at the Duke. “You would not mind, Claverhouse?”

Violet held her breath, aware that there was a great friendship between Lord Coatbridge and the Duke of Claverhouse, given the informal way that Lord Coatbridge referred to him. She prayed that such a friendship would encourage the Duke to be willing to permit Lord Coatbridge’s presence, and after a few moments, was granted that request. The Duke sighed, smiled, and dropped his arms, shrugging heavily as he did so.

“I take no offence in being removed from my position as sole companion to these two ladies,” he said, bowing towards Violet. “After all, I have behaved abominably and now must pay recompense.” Tilting his head, he gave Violet a playful smile. “Is that not so, Lady Violet?”

She did not answer him, finding his changeability a little unsettling. Instead, she only returned his look with a small smile before turning on her heel so that they might continue their walk. Lord Coatbridge fell into step beside her, and although they did not say a great deal, Violet found herself comforted by his presence. The Duke and Lady Mary walked behind, and although Violet heard her sister say one or two things, within a few minutes the Duke had again begun to dominate the conversation. Her brow furrowed and she bit her lip. Was she being foolish in continuing her acquaintance with the Duke? There was clearly a good deal more to his character than she had ever anticipated, and thus, Violet felt herself on her guard a little more. Perhaps she should consider what Lady Lydia had said with a good deal more seriousness, or else risk making a terrible mistake.

## 5

Samuel sat back in his chair and thought about the evening that was to come. He was due to attend Lord Johnstone's evening gathering, where there would be refreshments and entertainment—most likely, cards and the like. Of course, there would be many young ladies present, and no doubt, they would all be summoned to listen to them sing or play the pianoforte.

A small sigh escaped his lips. There was no sense of eagerness in his heart when he considered such a thing. He had been in London for a fortnight now and had already attended at least three such evenings. He had found them all to be very similar to each other. It was not that he disliked such singing or that the pianoforte music was poor or out of tune, but Samuel found that such performances did not seem to catch his attention very often at all. All these young ladies, whilst very lovely and most accomplished, did not even pique his interest, even though Samuel knew that they would all be an excellent match for him, should he wish to pursue one of them.

*They all dull in comparison.*

The thought entered his mind unbidden, and Samuel fought hard to push it away, knowing precisely who it was his thoughts were trying to pull him towards. Lady Violet was the most extraordinary young lady, and from the very beginning, he had found her quite astonishing. Yes, she had been very rude in referring to him as a footman and even more so by walking directly into his path and injuring him slightly, but such things made her stand out all the more from the others. Having had his intention of calling upon her and her sister thwarted, Samuel had been rather glad when he had practically stumbled back into their company and had been invited to walk with them both once more.

However, Samuel had not missed the Duke's frustration at his company and certainly had been a little upset and confused by the way that his friend had ignored him when he had first set foot into Lord Arrington's home. They had not yet had an opportunity to discuss the matter, but Samuel had every intention of doing so, for it had been very strange to be treated in such a manner. Yes, the

Duke had laughed off his evident chagrin and had been in good spirits and made excellent conversation for the duration of their walk together, but Samuel had still been aware that there was almost an animosity between them now—an animosity he wanted removed from their connection as soon as possible.

*What happens if it is Lady Violet?*

Samuel shook his head and tried to throw such a thought aside, but it lingered on regardless. Was the source of the Duke's contention the beautiful Lady Violet? Samuel suspected it was so, for the Duke had made his interest in her known from the first, although he had not made any attempt to court her. Yes, he had called upon her, but he had also done the same to many other young ladies over the course of the last fortnight. Surely, Samuel considered, if the Duke wished to devote himself to Lady Violet, then he would do so without hesitation. In waiting and in pursuing other young ladies also, it was apparent that the Duke was not yet entirely settled on the lady.

*But if he decides to pursue her? To seek to court her?*

"Then I will step aside," Samuel said aloud, his voice echoing around the empty room. "The Duke was in her company first. The Duke was introduced to her first. Therefore, I must step aside."

Sighing, Samuel pushed one hand through his hair and leaned his head back against his chair. He did not have any affection for the lady, he told himself firmly. He was merely interested in her. Intrigued, perhaps. But there was nothing of significance within his heart, which meant that should he be required to remove himself from her acquaintance so that the Duke might pursue her, then there would be no great difficulty in doing so.

A small scratch at the door interrupted him, and Samuel sat up straight before calling for his staff to enter.

"My lord?" A maid stepped into the room, her head bowed, and her hands clasped tightly together. "You asked to know about the boy?"

Samuel's interest flared in a moment. The injured child had been lying abed for the last two weeks, for there had been extensive damage to his leg that had required nothing but bedrest. Samuel had been forced to give not one but two of his maids to the child's sole care, although he had promised the housekeeper that he would hire another maid should it be required. As yet, however, that had not appeared to be necessary for the house appeared to be in much

the same state of cleanliness and organization as it had always been.

“Has he told you his name yet?” he asked as the maid glanced up at him for the smallest moment. “I know that you have already asked if he has family that could be looking for him, and the boy said that there is not. Do you know anything else about him?”

The maid shook her head. “He appears afraid, my lord,” she said quietly. “But he is able to walk about the room now, although he leans very heavily on my arm as he does so.”

This was a notable improvement, and Samuel found himself greatly relieved. “I am very glad to hear it,” he said softly, sinking into his chair a little more, only to suddenly throw himself out of it. “Is he awake at the present moment?”

The maid’s head shot up, and she stared at Samuel for a moment before nodding and dropping her gaze once more. “He is, my lord.”

“Then I think I shall converse with him,” Samuel replied steadily. “Is he below stairs?”

Wordlessly, the maid nodded, but Samuel did not hesitate. Quitting the room, he made his way quickly below stairs, ignoring the astonished gasps and whispers that came from the staff that surrounded him. It was not the done thing for the lord of the house to set foot in the servants’ quarters and yet here he was, doing that very thing.

“The boy?” he asked one of the footmen, who quickly and quietly led him to a small room at the very end of a long hallway. There was the sound of laughter coming from the room and, as Samuel entered, he saw the boy sitting up in bed, laughing at the other maid who was sitting just beside him.

Their faces both fell as Samuel stepped inside, with the maid hastily rising to her feet and smoothing her apron as she did so. Samuel waved a hand, putting a smile on his face.

“Pray, do not think I am come to prevent you from continuing on in this manner,” he said warmly as the maid glanced up at him. “You have been doing very well, I hear.” Much to the maid’s astonishment, Samuel came to sit down where she had been only a few moments ago, leaving her to move to the doorway. Samuel did not look back at her once, keeping his gaze instead fixed on the small boy, who had practically huddled himself in the blanket and, instead of laughing, now appeared very scared indeed.

“Good afternoon,” Samuel murmured, keeping his voice low and

yet putting as much warmth into it as he could. He did not want the child to see him as a threat. "You have been making vast improvements, I hear." He glanced at the maid, who nodded silently. "I hear you have been walking across the room."

The child did not say anything, his huge green eyes looking back at Samuel steadily. There was a paleness to his cheeks that Samuel was certain came from both the shock of Samuel's arrival as well as the child's own ill health. He prayed that, in time, the boy's pallor would improve.

"I am not here to hurt you," Samuel said quietly. "I took you into my home so that you might recover." Tilting his head just a little, he looked at the child steadily. "Do you recall what happened?"

It took some moments but, eventually, the boy gave him a small, jerky nod.

"The horse reared up and struck you, before its hooves landed hard on your leg," Samuel said as the child nodded again. "You will soon be walking and running again, however."

"And then what will happen to me?"

Surprise filled Samuel at the fear that had now filled the boy's voice. It was the first time the child had spoken, and Samuel wanted to encourage him to continue, although, at the same time, he wanted very much to chase away the boy's fear.

"I will continue to take care of you, should you wish it," he replied carefully. In truth, he had not given the situation any great thought, but it seemed to him to be the best option, given the circumstances. "There are positions here that you could fill. Perhaps one day, you might become a footman."

The boy's eyes widened, but after a moment, fell away from Samuel's face. The boy bit his lip and his hands played restlessly with the blanket, once more giving Samuel the impression that the child was afraid.

"You will have a warm bed and food to fill your stomach," he said, waiting until the boy finally looked up at him again before he continued. "You will not need to beg for coins any longer."

The child twisted his lips, a deep frown crossing his face as he studied Samuel's features. It was as though he did not know whether or not he might be able to trust Samuel's words and, thus, was entirely uncertain as to what to say in response.

"Might you tell me your name?"



The boy shook his head. "I don't want to."

"And why is that?"

Again, that frightened look came into the boy's eyes as his lips flattened together, his hands now clenched tightly together.

"I will not tell anyone that you are here," Samuel promised softly. "The maids and the footmen will not do so either." Leaning forward, he smiled gently. "I am Lord Coatbridge. It is a long name, certainly, but there it is."

The boy's lips curved gently but he then quickly looked away, appearing to Samuel to be even paler still.

"George."

The whisper was almost too quiet for Samuel to hear but his ears held onto the word until he finally made sense of what the boy had said.

"George?" he repeated as the boy gave a jerky nod, his head still twisted away. "Well, George, I am very pleased to meet you." Still smiling, he spread his hands. "Might I ask how old you are?"

The boy grimaced. "Ten."

There was a moment of astonishment as Samuel took in the age of the child. The boy looked much too small and thin to be of such an age, but there was no reason for the child to lie. For a moment, his stomach twisted as he thought of the life that George had been forced to endure thus far, and Samuel found himself wondering if the boy had ever had a day in his life where he did not feel hungry or cold.

George slowly turned his head back towards Samuel, his green eyes still clouded. "You swear?"

"Swear?" Samuel repeated, a little confused. "What do you mean?"

"You swear you won't tell anyone my name, or that I'm here?" the boy said, a slight challenge in his tone. "You said you wouldn't."

"And I abide by that." Samuel pressed one hand against his heart and nodded solemnly. "I swear to you I will not speak a word of your name to another living soul."

The boy hesitated for some moments, looking into Samuel's face with a good deal more boldness than before. Eventually, he nodded and then shrugged, wincing as he did so. "Good," was all he said.

Samuel frowned, wondering if he might ask the child something more but fearful that he would not answer him and instead, would

return to being tight-lipped. However, there was a clear sense of wariness about the boy and even the fact that he did not want Samuel to inform anyone of his presence spoke of a deep fear that Samuel wanted very much to remove from him.

“George,” he said slowly. “I must ask you something.”

The boy said nothing, although he continued to look back at Samuel questioningly.

“Is there someone you are afraid of?” Samuel asked, choosing to be blunt. “It seems to me that you are a little scared of something and I want to assure you that you will be as safe as can be here.” He did not know where such sentiment had come from, for as much as he had been concerned for the boy’s welfare, he had never been particularly emotional about the matter. However, now that he had sat by the boy’s bedside and looked into his enormous green eyes and very pale face, Samuel found that there was a growing concern in his heart for the child’s welfare. He did not think he could simply return him to the streets where he had first been found, not until he was certain that the boy would be cared for by someone.

“George?” he said gently, when the child said nothing. “I want to help you.”

The boy rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. “Why?” he asked, looking up at Samuel with suspicion in his gaze. “You didn’t even want to give me a coin before.”

Samuel grinned, delighted with the boy’s temerity. “That is very true,” he agreed unswervingly. “But I have taken you into my home whilst you recover and have offered you a place to live. You need not ever return to those streets and to whoever it is that you are so afraid of.” He had taken a chance by speaking so directly and his boldness was rewarded. George’s eyes rounded and he looked back at Samuel with evident shock, as though the idea that he would never again have to return there had only just come to him.

“I won’t have to go back to him?” he asked, his voice a thin whisper. “You swear it?”

This was the second time that the boy had asked such a thing, and Samuel immediately placed one hand on his heart, his face solemn.

“Never,” he promised. “Although I should still like to know the name of the man you are so afraid of.” He waited for a few moments, but George merely shook his head. “You will not speak of him?”

A shudder ran through the boy's frame. "He asked us to get a certain amount of money every day," he said, closing his eyes as though the memories were too much to endure. "If we didn't, then..."

Samuel's heart squeezed in sympathy as a small coil of anger began to twist itself all about him, determined now that he should one day find out the name of the man who had struck such fear into this young boy. "There are more of you?"

"At least ten, sir." George's tongue seemed to have loosened just a little. "But we have to give all the money to him and then he gives it to some..." His eyes opened and he stopped suddenly. "Someone like you."

Frowning, Samuel blinked rapidly and tried to understand what the child meant. "Someone like me?"

"Yes," George continued, speaking a little more eagerly now. "Someone who has all the fancy clothes. Someone who comes riding in on a horse and pretends he is more well-to-do than he is."

"You mean, he disguises himself?" Samuel asked, a little confused about what the boy meant. "You mean to tell me that there is a gentleman from the *ton* who has been doing such a thing?"

George nodded sagely, as though such a thing was to be expected. "That's right. He wears a dark cloak, but I can tell from his clothes that he's like you." He shook his head. "I wasn't meant to see him, of course, but I saw him taking the money. The money that we had got for him." His shoulders slumped and he closed his eyes, appearing quite weary. "I don't want to go back to him."

"Then you won't have to," Samuel said firmly, putting one hand on the boy's shoulder and waiting until George had lifted his head and looked back at him. "I swear to you, George. You have a home here now."



“You look quite exhausted.”

Samuel had decided to speak with as much joviality as he could muster with the Duke of Claverhouse, and much to his relief, it appeared to work. The Duke grinned back at him and slapped Samuel hard on the shoulder.

“Coatbridge!” he boomed loudly. “How good to see you.”

“Are you certain about that?” Samuel enquired, still keeping his tone light. “I had thought you a little frustrated the last time we met.”

The Duke hesitated for a moment and then laughed. “Indeed, indeed. I confess that to be true,” he replied, an apologetic expression on his face. “I treated you a trifle unfairly, Coatbridge, and for that I apologize.” He swept into a deep bow and left Samuel to study his friend carefully, wondering if it was entirely genuine.

“The truth of the matter is,” the Duke continued, sounding a little more grave, “I wished very much to be in the company of Lady Violet. Even though I managed to achieve such a desire, I was also in the company of Lady Mary, and shortly thereafter, you also.”

“You could hardly expect the lady to walk with you alone,” Samuel reminded his friend as the Duke grinned in a playful manner. “That would not have been at all proper.”

The Duke shrugged as though to say that, whilst he knew that to be true, he also hoped that, on occasion, such propriety would be set aside, given his status. Samuel resisted the urge to roll his eyes, although he was relieved that there was now no tension lingering between them.

“I treated you most unfairly, and for that, I deeply apologize,” the Duke said firmly. “It was quite wrong of me, and I am sure you were hurt by my lack of consideration.”

Samuel spread his hands. “It is at an end now, however,” he said warmly. “If you are eager to pursue Lady Violet, then I will, of course, make certain not to interrupt such endeavors in any way.” He could not pretend that he did not feel a kick of disappointment at such an announcement, although he did manage to ignore it entirely. “She is a very beautiful lady.”

“And her father is very wealthy, even for an earl,” the Duke replied, chuckling. “But of course, such things are trifles. I do find her very comely, and her conversation is always pleasing.” A slight fading of his smile and a hardening of his gaze betrayed a small displeasure, however. “She did speak a little harshly when we took

our walk, but that, I suppose, is understandable.”

Samuel, who recalled the severe expression on Lady Violet’s face as she had called for him to join them, nodded. “What was it you had done?” he asked, seeing the Duke’s face twist into an expression of frustration. “She was clearly upset with something that had taken place.”

“I had merely stopped to speak to an old acquaintance,” the Duke protested, holding up both hands in defense of himself. “I believe the lady felt ignored, and given that she was displeased, chose to insist upon your company—although I am sure it was to spite me.” His face fell and Samuel found himself feeling a little sorry for his friend. “Did you have a good conversation with the lady?” His brow furrowed. “Lady Mary spoke very little, I am afraid.”

Samuel smiled and lifted one shoulder. “Lady Violet said barely a word to me,” he said honestly. “I did not have much of a conversation with her at all.”

This seemed to please the Duke, for his lip curved upward on one side, which left Samuel feeling a little irritated. But then, the moment passed, and the Duke was all contentment again.

“I think I will pursue Lady Violet, Coatbridge,” the Duke said, snapping his fingers at a footman, who immediately brought them both some more refreshments. “I must be certain, however.” His eyes narrowed just a little as he looked back at Samuel. “It is not something that I wish to rush.”

“Understandable,” Samuel replied with a small shrug. “If one is considering one’s future, then the choice of bride is surely one of the most important.”

“I am glad you understand,” the Duke replied warmly. “And what about you? Are you thinking of catching one of these debutantes for yourself?” He lifted one eyebrow, but Samuel only laughed, shaking his head and finding that, for some reason, he did not wish to speak honestly with the Duke. Thankfully, they were then interrupted by Lord Johnstone—their host for this evening’s soiree—and the conversation soon turned to other things.

## 6

"I am *sure* that the Duke of Claverhouse will come to speak to your father very soon."

Violet closed her eyes momentarily and wished that her mother would stop speaking in such a loud and obtuse manner, finding herself sinking into the depths of mortification. Her sister touched her arm, and Violet gave her a small smile, knowing that Mary, at least, was sympathetic to her particular struggles at the present moment.

"There is Miss Kelling, Mama," she said quickly as Lady Arrington opened her mouth to say yet more about how the Duke had been so very persistent in his eagerness to court Violet. "Might you excuse us?"

"But of course," Lady Arrington replied eagerly. "After all, the Duke has already secured his two dances with you, my dear. Just be sure to stand somewhere where he can easily find you. You would not wish to miss them."

Violet nodded, smiled tightly, and stepped away, relieved when they were away from their mother. This evening's ball was a smaller affair, with only selected members of the *ton* being invited, which meant that Violet was even more aware of the Duke's particular interest when he had immediately come across the room to greet her. Her mother had been practically gushing with delight at his presence and had said so many things that Violet had barely been required to say even a word to him.

"I am sorry the Duke did not ask you to dance also, Mary," she said quietly as they approached Miss Kelling. "I am a little surprised that he did not."

"It does not upset me in the least," Lady Mary replied firmly. "We are not to speak of him, as you know, but you need not think that I am in any way insulted by his lack of attention." She tossed her head, her curls tumbling about her face. "In fact, I am a little relieved."

Violet was spared from answering and, instead, was quickly drawn into conversation with Miss Kelling. They spoke of a good

many things and carefully avoided the topic of the Duke of Claverhouse, even though his presence here this evening was something that practically everyone was speaking of.

“Our cousin is here also,” Violet told her friend, “but she suffered an unfortunate mishap with her gown.” She shook her head, grimacing. “An idiotic gentleman trod very heavily on her gown and tore a hole in the seam.”

“It is being sewn by the maid,” Lady Mary added hastily. “It is just as well there is a room set aside for such things, else I do not know what she would have done.”

“Good evening, Lady Violet.”

A deep voice interrupted their conversation, and Violet turned her head at once, a little surprised to see Lord Coatbridge standing there expectantly. Immediately, her face began to fill with heat, and she dropped her head as she curtsied quickly, recalling just how poorly she had behaved the last time they had been in company together. Why, she had practically strongarmed him into walking with them and had thereafter said barely a word. Little wonder that he was looking at her with such a curious expression; he would have very little idea as to what she would do next.

“Lady Mary,” Lord Coatbridge continued, bowing next to Violet’s sister. “Good evening. I hope you are both enjoying yourselves thus far.” He glanced at Miss Kelling and smiled, although waited next to be introduced to her before he continued. Thankfully for Violet, Mary was more than willing to do so, which allowed Violet a few more moments to compose herself.

“You will, of course, already be busy with a good many dances filled,” Lord Coatbridge said, once introductions had been made. “Might I enquire as to whether or not I would be able to sign my name to one?” He did not look at Violet as he spoke, which, much to her surprise, left her with a deep sense of disappointment. She dropped her head just a little and looked to her sister, seeing how Mary quickly pulled her dance card and then handed it to Lord Coatbridge. Miss Kelling was next, and as the minutes passed by, Violet began to fear that Lord Coatbridge would not ask her for her own card. He had been too confused by her, too insulted and maligned.

*Then why did he come to greet you this evening?*

The small voice in her head made Violet frown, realizing that she was still not quite certain why Lord Coatbridge had come to

greet them. If he did not wish to be in her company, then surely he would have stayed far from her? Perhaps she *was* to have a dance with him after all.

“And, finally, Lady Violet.” Lord Coatbridge turned to her and smiled, an expectant look on his face. “Come now, my lady,” he said, perhaps seeing the worry on her features. “You did not think that I would not wish to dance with you also. I should never be so ungentlemanly.”

Violet’s face grew hot as she handed over her dance card, finding that any words she wished to speak stuck in her throat and refused to budge. She had not realized that her worry had been so obviously written across her face and was now all the more embarrassed.

“There, you see?” Lord Coatbridge said, handing her back her card, which Violet took with slightly trembling fingers. “I have taken two of your dances, Lady Violet, so that you will not feel at all maligned.”

A small flush crept up Violet’s cheeks as she looked at her card, seeing that he had taken both her quadrille and the first waltz, with the second, the supper dance, having already been taken by the Duke. For whatever reason, the thought of being in his arms in such an intimate fashion for the waltz made Violet’s cheeks catch with fire and her breath hitch. It took her a few moments before she was able to look back up into his eyes.

Lord Coatbridge was smiling at her gently, with his hazel eyes, flecked with sparks of gold, warm and friendly as they studied her. Violet managed to return his smile with one of her own, finding herself bobbing a curtsy even though such a thing was not required.

“You are very kind, Lord Coatbridge,” she said, unaware of her sister and Miss Kelling taking a small step away from her so that she might continue her conversation with Lord Coatbridge uninterrupted, and yet, staying well within the bounds of propriety. “I must confess, I had thought you would wish to remain away from my company, given all that I have done to you from the very beginning of our acquaintance, Lord Coatbridge.” She stopped suddenly, realizing that she had said more than she had ever intended. Closing her eyes and fearing that she had made things all the worse, Violet was astonished to hear a small chuckle coming from Lord Coatbridge.

“Lady Violet, I will not pretend that I do not find our



acquaintance a somewhat strained one,” he told her as she peeked out from under her lashes to look at him. “But I will confess that I find you one of the most intriguing young ladies of my acquaintance.”

A ragged breath escaped from her, half a laugh, half an exhalation of shock.

“I do not think I know a single other person in my acquaintance who spoke to me as though I were a footman,” he continued, making Violet squeeze her eyes closed again in embarrassment, only to feel his hand touching hers.

“Pray, I do not speak so in order to embarrass you,” he continued, his tone now a good deal more gentle. “Forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” she repeated, her voice rasping with surprise. “Lord Coatbridge, there is nothing that you need to apologize for. I am the one who ought to do so over and over again, given all that I have done that has been most improper.”

He let go of her hand and a warmth began to seep into Violet’s frame, coursing up her arm from where their fingers had touched. “I spoke to you as though you were a servant, I then practically knocked you to the ground. Thereafter, you were refused your request to call on us—which, I am sure, my mother had already encouraged you in—” A small glance away from her told Violet that her conclusion was correct. “And finally, I dragged you into our company to walk with myself, my sister, and the Duke, only to remain a very dull and very silent companion.” She spread her hands and shook her head. “Lord Coatbridge, I am truly sorry for all such mistakes and miscalculations. Your willingness to endure my company even for a few minutes speaks well of your character.”

Lord Coatbridge chuckled, and as Violet smiled back, she found the tension and uneasiness that had been between them begin to dissipate. This was the first time they had spoken openly of all that had occurred between them, and Violet was very glad of it. It meant that they were able to talk without difficulty, having already addressed the *many* causes of such an obstacle between them.

“I confess that I must have looked very much like an unruly, poorly dressed servant,” Lord Coatbridge admitted, a wry smile pulling at one side of his mouth. “I was without my coat, I believe my sleeves were not even buttoned, and my horse, as you said, was already wandering around outside my townhouse.”

She nodded, her curiosity rising within her. “You were quite all

right, I hope?" she asked, seeing him nod.

It had been a very odd situation to walk into, having seen the horse outside and then demanding that the man she believed to be a footman go to see to it. Thereafter, there had been another man practically barging past her, holding a limp child in his arms, but Violet had been too embarrassed to stay.

She had removed herself from the situation at once and had felt so much mortification that she had not had the opportunity to even *think* on what had actually taken place. Now, however, she found her curiosity piqued, even though she reminded herself firmly that it was not any of her business.

"I was a little...shocked," Lord Coatbridge replied, a slight frown pulling at his forehead. "My horse had struck a child and—" He broke off, hearing her gasp, his brow now furrowed. "The child was begging for some money, and it was entirely unintentional, but my horse reared up and injured the boy badly. However," he continued, brightening, "George is now in my servants' quarters and is recovering well."

"George?" Violet repeated, a little breathlessly. "That is the boy's name?"

Her mind began to fasten itself upon the idea of a gentleman insisting that a small street boy be taken back to his townhouse to recover, for such a thing had never taken place within her father's own household. Most likely, Violet reflected, gentlemen would simply ignore what had occurred and would have left the child to be cared for by another. But Lord Coatbridge had not. He had insisted that the boy be taken to his own house and now cared for him there. Did that not speak well of Lord Coatbridge's character? Violet was certain that it must.

"It is," Lord Coatbridge acknowledged, although much to her surprise, his gaze darted away for a few moments before he glanced back at her again, a look of uncertainty now held within them. "I have promised him a bed and a position, should he wish to take it." One shoulder lifted in a half-shrug. "No doubt I will seem a little ridiculous to you, Lady Violet, but I felt entirely responsible for what occurred and could not simply leave the child on the road."

"Oh, no, indeed not." Violet's hand had reached out of seemingly its own accord and now fastened itself onto Lord Coatbridge's arm. "I do not think you ridiculous at all, Lord Coatbridge. Indeed, I was just thinking to myself that such an act

speaks very highly of your character. I do not think that I know very many gentlemen who would do such a thing.”

Lord Coatbridge did not immediately reply. Instead, he simply held her gaze steadily, and slowly, Violet soon became aware of the sparks that were now shooting up her arm and making their way towards her heart. Her breathing quickened as she looked into Lord Coatbridge’s eyes, feeling something quite remarkable going on within her but, as yet, being unsure as to what it could be.

A gentle clearing of the throat from her sister brought Violet back to herself, and she immediately dropped Lord Coatbridge’s arm just as he looked away, seeming a little embarrassed.

“I am very glad that you are so very forgiving,” Violet told him quietly, forcing the words from her lips so that she would not fall back into a state of embarrassment. “And that you are seemingly so very kind-hearted also. It speaks very highly of you and makes me believe that you will not hold my previous mistakes against me.”

His eyes glowed and a smile spread across his face as he looked back at her, and, in that moment, Violet realized just how truly handsome Lord Coatbridge truly was. She could say nothing more but allowed her gaze to linger on him for just a little longer, watching him carefully as he spoke.

“I should not even *think* of doing so, Lady Violet,” he told her. “From this day on, you may trust that I shall never think of such things again.” His eyes twinkled and Violet opened her mouth to say something more, only for the next dance to be announced. In an instant, as though he had been waiting for the opportunity to do so, the Duke of Claverhouse appeared by Violet’s side.

Her heart sank, although she forced herself to smile in apparent anticipation of her dance with him. It was a very strange sensation to be so eager to remain in the company of one gentleman but being forced, at the very same time, to remove herself from his company for the sake of another. She had thought that she would be a *little* contented with the Duke’s company, but for whatever reason, Violet found herself eager to remain in the company of Lord Coatbridge.

There was warmth, understanding, and friendliness in his character, whereas she was becoming all the more aware that the Duke’s character was one that lacked true consideration. He was, she realized, a truly selfish gentleman who, lost in his own arrogance and sense of importance, found it difficult to think of

others. Her mother was quite certain that the Duke would soon seek to court her with the intention of matrimony, but Violet herself was not quite so sure. Even if the Duke *did* seek to do so, would she accept him? Would she be willing to set aside all that Lady Lydia had told her? Despite the pressure that she would no doubt receive from her mother and her father, Violet was not at all certain that she would simply accept without question.

*Whereas, if it was Lord Coatbridge...*

She did not have time to finish her thought, for the Duke was now seeking to bear her away onto the dance floor. Bobbing a quick curtsy and stating that she was very much looking forward to their dances together, Violet had no choice but to accept the Duke's arm. Making her way past him, Violet stopped suddenly and turned back to face Lord Coatbridge, whilst the Duke's hovering arm waited expectantly.

"I should be glad if you would call again, Lord Coatbridge," she found herself saying, shocking herself by her own boldness. "I know that you were not treated as a gentleman caller ought to have been, and I can only apologize for such a thing, but I can assure you that it will not happen again."

Lord Coatbridge cleared his throat abruptly, sticking both hands behind his back and dropping his head for a moment, as though a little embarrassed.

"I—I will certainly consider it, Lady Violet," he said, speaking so quietly that Violet struggled to hear him, all too aware of the Duke's urgent voice, pulling her away. "Thank you, Lady Violet."

She smiled and nodded, aware of just how hot her face was but refusing to allow it to overwhelm her. Having spoken her heart, she was glad that she had done so, feeling no shame or embarrassment but rather a great sense of awareness of just how bold she had been.

"I thank you, Lord Coatbridge," she said softly. "Then I shall look forward to seeing you at our townhouse again soon."

It had been an excellent evening.

Smiling to himself, Samuel threw himself into an overstuffed chair and let out a long sigh of contentment. He had found himself seeking out Lady Violet without having had any real intention of doing so and, from that decision, had brought about a restoring of their acquaintance. There was no longer any awkwardness between them, for he had been able to explain why he had appeared to be so very discombobulated when she had first seen him, which was why she thought him to be a servant. They had laughed about the situation, had made light of all that had taken place, and Samuel had been able to find a new connection between them both. A connection that, should he permit it to grow, might make him very contented indeed.

*Except you cannot.*

The smile that played around the corners of Samuel's mouth soon faded as he realized the facts of the matter. Should the Duke of Claverhouse seek to court Lady Violet, then he would do what was right and stay far from her. The lady would have to make her decision as regarded the Duke, but Samuel had very little intention of remaining anywhere near to her, should such a thing take place. After all, by all accounts, the Duke of Claverhouse was very close to considering Lady Violet to be his bride, although there had been nothing significant said or done by the Duke himself. Yes, he continued to show Lady Violet a substantial amount of attention, which, of course, had the *ton* tongues wagging. But there was nothing else of significance in his acquaintance with her as yet.

*Should you wish to court her yourself?*

Even though it was a question in his own mind, Samuel felt himself grow uneasy. He was not at all certain of all that he currently felt, for it was a very strange sensation that filled his heart and his mind. There was a very strong awareness of just how beautiful Lady Violet was, for Samuel could not remove the image of her from his mind. Her lavender-blue eyes seemed to draw him in, seemed to pull him back towards her so that, no matter where

he looked or what he thought of, he found himself eager to remain in her company. How he longed to see her smile without hindrance. That, he was certain, would light up her features all the more and make her quite breathtaking.

At the present moment, there was still a little reserve, a little uncertainty between them, which Samuel wanted to remove entirely. That would take time, but he was certain there would soon be a strong connection between them.

*And then what will you do?*

Samuel's smile faded as he realized what might soon come to pass. He might find himself with a delightful acquaintance in Lady Violet, only to see his friend, the Duke, seeking to wed her. Would he then stand in the church and watch them become man and wife? Would he be truly happy about such a thing?

Swirling the glass of brandy in his hand, Samuel looked down at the amber liquid and found himself frowning hard. The truth was, he did *not* think he would be happy to see the Duke married to Lady Violet. It was not that Samuel believed the Duke unworthy of her, but rather that he did not seem to like the idea of Lady Violet being wed to anyone at all. It was a very peculiar feeling, for until now, he had only thought of Lady Violet to be a beautiful yet intriguing young lady, whereas now he realized that he might now be feeling something of a little more significance.

Blinking rapidly, Samuel drew in a deep breath and tried to settle his now whirring thoughts. *It does not matter what you feel*, he told himself sternly. *The Duke has made himself clear as regards the lady. If he pursues her, then as a gentleman, you have no right to step in his way.*

There was a part of Samuel's heart that cried out with the injustice of it all, for surely, since the Duke had not said anything of note to the lady, Samuel had every right to step forward. It was the Duke's own failing if he did not manage to do so in time. But then Samuel shook his head to himself. It would be entirely ungentlemanly to do such a thing, not when he knew that the Duke had spoken openly with him about Lady Violet. It might be fair, certainly, but the friendship and camaraderie between himself and his friend would be entirely ruined, and that was not something that Samuel wished to break apart.

"Ah, there you are!"

A familiar voice reached Samuel's ears and he looked up to see

none other than the Duke himself, the very man he had been thinking of, come staggering towards him. A lopsided grin was plastered across the Duke's face, and Samuel could not help but snort with laughter, realizing that the Duke was heavily in his cups.

"I did not realize you were looking for me, Duke," Samuel replied as the Duke managed, on the third attempt, to sit down in the chair opposite. "I presume you have had a pleasant evening?"

The Duke chuckled, his head lolling back as he closed his eyes. "A very good evening," he agreed. "The whisky was excellent."

Samuel, who had sampled a measure or two himself, could not help but agree. "Indeed it was," he replied, still grinning broadly. "And I presume that you have also enjoyed excellent company? After all, you were dancing almost every dance, I believe."

Wagging one finger, the Duke's eyes opened just a little. "I danced *every* dance," he corrected, his words slurring together just a little. "And two with Lady Violet, although I should have liked to have danced three."

The smile that Samuel wore instantly began to fade as a tightness filled him. Keeping his voice as pleasant as he could, he waved to the nearby footman to get them both a fresh glass. "You would have declared your intentions to the *ton*, had you done so," he said lightly. "And I doubt that Lady Arrington would have permitted you to do so."

The Duke chuckled lazily. "I would have convinced her," he said arrogantly. "But yes, I have decided that I must settle on Lady Violet."

A slight frown crossed Samuel's brow. "Must?" he repeated, eyeing the Duke carefully. "That does not speak of great affection." His heart began to beat a little more quickly as he realized—much to his horror—that his friend felt nothing at all for Lady Violet.

"I do not know what you mean," the Duke said as the footman set down two glasses—one for Samuel and one for the Duke. "Affection is not something I have ever considered."

"I am surprised," Samuel replied quickly, wondering if he would get a little more honesty from his friend, given his current state of inebriation. "I would have thought that you would have done all you could to find yourself a young lady that you might come to care for."

The Duke's laughter seemed to reverberate through White's but, Samuel himself did not smile. This was not at all what he had

expected. He had thought that the Duke would have given consideration to what he might *feel* for a lady rather than simply deciding that one was a little more favorable than the others.

"I do not care about whether or not the lady is worthy of my affection, Coatbridge." the man laughed as Samuel watched him shrewdly. "You are my old friend. I thought you would have known that I am not a gentleman inclined towards feeling."

"I—I suppose you are not," Samuel replied slowly, not quite certain what his friend was saying. "But I had always thought that, when it came to the lady you would seek to wed—"

"I have no time for such ridiculous things," came the harsh reply, all mirth suddenly wiped from the Duke's face. "I have to consider only one thing: wealth."

Samuel did not know what to say to this remark. Wealth? He stared blankly back at the Duke for some moments, not understanding what his friend meant by such a statement. Why should the Duke of Claverhouse consider how wealthy a young lady might be? He had more than enough wealth, surely? Samuel had not thought the Duke a greedy gentleman, but perhaps he had been mistaken in that regard. After all, he reminded himself slowly, he had not seen the Duke in some time, and while he had known him well at Eton, he did not know his character particularly well any longer. Had he changed in some great way since then? A little uncertain, Samuel looked back at his friend and waited, praying that the Duke would give him some clearer explanation.

"You are wondering why I need such wealth," the Duke muttered, pressing one hand to his eyes as he blew out a long breath, as though frustrated at Samuel's silence. "Well, Lady Violet may only be the daughter of an earl rather than a marquess or a duke, but I have made some careful explorations and discovered that the Earl of Arrington is a very fortunate gentleman." A thin-lipped smile pulled at his mouth, and a shiver ran down Samuel's spine. This was not boding well for Lady Violet. "His estate has been very profitable, and investments he has made have given excellent returns." A small, smug smile crossed his lips, his eyes still remaining closed as though he was basking in all that he had learned. "Therefore, I am certain that he will give Lady Violet a *substantial* dowry. Having made a few further enquiries, I have discovered also that after she is wed, Lady Violet is set to receive a generous yearly income, which, once her father passes away, will



increase all the more.” He laughed, but Samuel’s stomach turned over in disgust. “And there will be something more for her on both her father and her mother’s passing, I am sure.”

Samuel swallowed hard, reaching for his fresh glass of brandy and taking a large mouthful. The heat of the liquid chased away some of the coldness that had run through him a few moments ago but did not remove it all. He could hardly believe what he had heard. He could not seem to take it in, for this was not at all what he had expected to hear from the Duke of Claverhouse’s lips. To be seeking to wed Lady Violet simply because she would bring in an excellent dowry to the marriage was no good reason at all, and if Samuel were honest, he found the idea to be quite disgusting.

“You do not need coin, surely,” he muttered, setting down his brandy glass with a hard clunk. “I am surprised at you. You are the Duke, after all.” It was just as well that the Duke was so much in his cups, for he gave his answers easily and without hesitation, perhaps thinking that whatever he said would bring Samuel’s approval.

“Alas, I have fallen on hard times.”

Samuel’s eyes narrowed and his voice was hard. “Indeed?” He had known of the Duke’s father, the late Duke of Claverhouse, and had been all too aware of just how much wealth the family enjoyed. His friend had often boasted of it during their time at Eton, and Samuel had never had any reason not to believe it. Therefore, he could not simply accept the Duke’s statement to be the truth. There must be something more to it than that. “Is your estate no longer profitable?”

Sighing, the Duke threw up his hands, wide-eyed in apparent innocence. “My man of business states that it is doing very well,” he said, “but yet I see very little of its profits.”

“You do not oversee such things yourself?” Samuel asked, a little surprised. “What if he is cheating you somehow?”

The Duke hesitated, his gaze sliding away from Samuel entirely. “I—I am sure he is not,” he replied slowly. “It is not his fault that I have a lack of coin at present.”

Samuel closed his eyes, letting out a long breath through his nostrils as he realized what the Duke was saying. “Then you have lost a good deal of your wealth?”

“Shhhh!” The Duke’s eyes slanted from left to right and he lifted one finger to his lips in a childlike gesture, although Samuel did not miss the hint of mischief that came into his friend’s eyes. “You

cannot tell anyone else. I will do all I can to recover it, of course, but it will be some time."

Opening his eyes, Samuel did not immediately reply. There was a frustration growing within his heart that he dared not yet voice. A vision of Lady Violet flew before him, seeing her smile up at him in that uncertain way she had done only that evening, and instantly, his frustration turned to anger.

The Duke could not simply wed the lady because she had wealth. Or, at the very least, he ought to let her know the truth of his situation. That way, she would not think that he was courting and even proposing to her out of a sense of true affection and devotion.

"You must understand, this is all a great secret," the Duke slurred, his eyes closing for a moment as though he did not have the energy to speak openly. "The *ton* must not—cannot—know of it."

"But you will have to speak to the lady herself," Samuel prompted. "After all, if she thinks you vastly wealthy, only to realize that her status will be severely curtailed after your marriage, that will not be at all fair."

The Duke's hard and cold laugh shot through Samuel, and he shuddered visibly, realizing now that there was a cruelty and a selfishness to his friend's character that he had not previously seen. The answer to Samuel's suggestion was clear and Samuel himself did not know what to think. The Duke was clearly willing to do all he could to convince Lady Violet and, of course, her father that their match and their marriage would be a very happy one. Whilst, in truth, the Duke was only doing so in order to remove himself from his debts.

"Your wife, whoever she may be, will require money spent on her," Samuel said warningly. "You are aware of that, are you not?"

A lazy hand was thrown out towards him. "A lady does not need new gowns if she continually remains at home, Coatbridge," he said, as though Samuel was being utterly ridiculous. "Once I am wed, there will be no need for Lady Violet to come back to London. She will remain at the estate and spend her time there."

A slow, creeping horror began to come over Samuel. "But she will need company," he said, trying to keep his tone as measured as possible. "That is not to say that *your* company will not be most excellent, but—"

"My company?" the Duke interrupted, laughing uproariously once more, his eyes crinkling in the corners as if Samuel had said something truly comical. "You truly do not imagine that I have any intention of *remaining* with my wife at home, do you?" He laughed again, slapping his knee, so great was his mirth. "My dear old friend, I have every intention of continuing on much as I am at present. Lady Violet will have more than enough to keep her amused, and of course, there will be the heir to produce." Another grin spread across his face, his eyes gleaming with good humor, whilst Samuel felt a great and heavy darkness begin to settle over his soul. "Once that is done, however, I will spend very little time at the estate. Why would I wish to spend time with only *one* lady when there are so many here that seek out my company?"

It was a question that Samuel knew he did not need to answer. He felt nauseous at the very thought of Lady Violet being so condemned, almost able to see how her bright, vivacious character would be left to shrink and die away under the neglect of the Duke. It was clear that the Duke had no intention of being at all faithful to his wife and, aside from producing the heir and the spare, would leave her entirely alone.

He could not let such a thing happen.

"You must tell her of your intentions, Claverhouse," he said, half rising out of his chair as the Duke continued to laugh. "It would not be right to treat her so."

The Duke shook his head, obviously believing that what Samuel was saying was meant to be taken as a joke. "You are ridiculous, my friend."

"I am serious." Samuel rose from his chair fully and stood directly in front of his friend. "You must be honest with her. It is unfair to expect her to join with you in marriage without having any awareness of what her future will be."

Slowly, the smile faded away and the laughter died as the Duke began to realize that his friend was being utterly serious. His eyes, which still swam a little with inebriation, attempted to focus on Samuel and, when he eventually managed to, held them fast.

"If I tell her, Coatbridge, then she will most likely refuse me."

Samuel lifted his chin. "It is unfair to treat any lady in such a manner, Claverhouse," he stated unequivocally. "They must know what they are to expect."

"They are to expect to be a duchess!" The Duke threw himself

from his chair in an explosive moment, only to then grasp a hold of Samuel as he swayed wildly about. "Surely that is every young lady's dream. They *all* wish to be my wife, so that they might parade about in their new title and feel the same self-importance as I do." He chuckled, his eyes closing as, once again, he lost himself in his stupor. "I am very arrogant, am I not?"

It was not the time for firm conversation, Samuel realized. His friend was much too inebriated for them to speak openly. Sighing, he slowly lowered the Duke back into his seat and then, after a moment, sat down himself.

His mind was heavy. The Duke had said and expressed more than Samuel had ever expected, and in doing so, he had revealed a truth about his character that Samuel had never expected. He had known that his friend was a selfish creature, certainly, but had never expected this level of cruelty.

"Can I even call you my friend any longer?" he murmured, seeing the Duke's eyes slide closed, his elbow on the edge of the chair as his hand propped up his head as it lolled about.

There was no desire in Samuel's heart to have a friend who wished to behave in such a thoughtless and selfish manner. And neither could he simply stand aside and allow the Duke to proceed, not when Lady Violet was the one who would bear the consequences. Part of him wanted to get to his feet this very moment and go to find her, praying that she might still be at the ball so that he might speak to her openly and honestly, but still, Samuel remained in his seat. With a furrowed brow, he continued to regard the Duke of Claverhouse, beginning to feel that this was the first time he had ever truly laid eyes upon him.

"One more opportunity," he murmured, closing his eyes in frustration as a loud snore emitted from the Duke's lips. "I will give you one more chance to tell her the truth, Claverhouse, else I will do it for you." It was more than Samuel's heart wanted to give, but his mind told him it was fair. Lady Violet would be protected one way or the other, and Samuel could only pray that she would not choose the title of a duchess over a life of happiness that could be with another.

*She could have true happiness with me.*

The thought came unbidden, but Samuel did not throw it aside. Instead, he allowed it to linger and felt a small spark of hope burst into life in the very depths of his soul. He would do what was right

and pray that the Duke would, when given the choice, choose to do so too.

## 8

“Lord Coatbridge?”

Violet did not mean for the name of that particular gentleman to escape her lips, but the very moment that the butler entered the drawing room carrying a card on a silver tray, she found it pulled from her in an instant. Blushing furiously, she waited until the butler had presented the card to her mother, before looking back at Lady Arrington with what she hoped was an innocent enough expression.

“It is Lord Fairweather,” her mother murmured, throwing a quick, curious glance at Violet. “You are expecting someone else? The Duke of Claverhouse is to meet us all in Hyde Park for the fashionable hour, though, Violet. I do hope you are remembering that.”

Her mother was clearly reminding her that there was someone of greater significance than either Lord Fairweather or Lord Coatbridge, but the mention of the Duke brought no joy to Violet’s heart. Giving her mother a somewhat lackluster smile, she then quickly sat up straight and forced a smile to her lips, ready to greet Lord Fairweather.

Lord Fairweather was a tall, thin gentleman who showed no interest whatsoever in Violet. Instead, he appeared to be very intrigued when it came to her sister, although Lady Mary was not at all inclined to converse with the gentleman and remained somewhat tight-lipped. Violet could not blame her sister for behaving so, for Lord Fairweather was yet another gentleman who talked of nothing but himself—his own estate, his own fortune, his own horses, and his own pastimes—without showing a singular interest in anything that Lady Mary might have to say for herself. He asked no questions and instead continued to drone on about his many accomplishments, achievements, and high standing in society. Violet hid a smile as her sister shot her a quick look, seeing the arching of Lady Mary’s eyebrow and knowing precisely what her sister was thinking.

*How very much like the Duke of Claverhouse this gentleman is.*

The thought was an abrupt one but not unwelcome. Violet considered it carefully, tilting her head as she studied Lord Fairweather, who was now gesticulating wildly about some great disaster that had taken place during his last hunt back at his estate. The Duke of Claverhouse was very much inclined to talk only of himself, to think solely of himself, and to express only his own desires and expectations. She did not recall when he had last asked her how she was or what she was thinking of. Even during their dances together at the most recent ball, the Duke had been speaking only of those who he was sure were watching them dance. During the supper dance, she had sat quietly at the table with a few other guests and had barely said a word whilst the Duke had monopolized the conversation.

The other guests had been delighted at such a thing, of course, but Violet had found herself growing weary of being so very much ignored. It was as if she were naught but a little adornment for the Duke's clothing, an addition to make him look all the better—and Violet did not want to be treated in such a way.

*Then it appears his character is not at all changed.*

The heavy thought swept through her mind, and Violet had to acknowledge it to be the truth. She had, she realized, begun to see the truth of the Duke's character even from the very beginning of their acquaintance but had not wanted to see it until this moment. Everything that Lady Lydia had told her was the truth, and Violet could see now that there had been no significant change in the Duke's character. Lady Lydia had not told her everything that had occurred but had warned her against having any sort of close acquaintance with him, and she had been right to do so.

The faint hope that Violet had pressed on with for so long, the prayers that the Duke's character might already have begun to change, were now pulled from her entirely. It had been foolish of her, she admitted, dropping her head as her mother continued to converse with Lord Fairweather. It had been entirely ridiculous to continue thinking in such a way in the vague hope that she might have a happy and contented future as a duchess.

*Besides which, came the small voice of her conscience, that would have been entirely self-serving.*

A heat came into her face as Violet acknowledged this. The only reason she had prayed for a change in the Duke's character was so that she might enjoy the title and the accolades that would come

with being a duchess. That had been the reason for her reluctance to accept that the Duke was as Lady Lydia had told her. A part of her had wanted that title, and to be seen as the one young lady, from all of the *ton*, who had been able to secure the Duke's hand and heart.

How foolish she had been.

"Alas, I must bid you farewell." Lord Fairweather rose, having not even sipped at his tea, given that it would have prevented him from speaking so very much. "My time has great demands upon me, and I am now called to Lady Morris."

Violet rose, alongside Lady Mary and her mother, to bid Lord Fairweather farewell. She was just about to take her seat again when the butler entered with yet another card. Closing her eyes for a moment and telling herself that afternoon calls would soon be ended, she felt herself come alive with anticipation the very next moment, upon hearing that it was Lord Coatbridge who had come to call.

Her reaction was not one she could easily explain, for there was no particular reason that she ought to feel such a thing for Lord Coatbridge's presence, and yet, she found a great thrill of eager excitement at his arrival. Rising to her feet and studiously avoiding the curious glances that Lady Mary was sending in her direction, Violet lifted her chin and fixed her eyes to the door, ready to greet Lord Coatbridge.

He did not disappoint her. Walking into the room, his shoulders held straight, and his head held high, he stopped quickly and gave a very pronounced bow towards Lady Arrington. His sandy brown hair brushed across his forehead as he lifted his head and quickly turned towards her and Lady Mary, greeting them all with the same warm, effusive tone. For whatever reason, Violet's heart lifted at the sight of him and when she returned his greeting, she found herself a little breathless.

"Good afternoon, Lord Coatbridge," she said as her mother rang the bell for yet another tea tray. "I am very glad that you have accepted my invitation to call."

Lord Coatbridge held her gaze for some moments without saying a single word, and Violet was surprised to see a great seriousness swirling about them, for there was no warmth in his hazel eyes. His lips were pulled straight and there was a small, flickering frown about his forehead that spoke of something severe and weighty



resting in his mind.

"But of course," Lord Coatbridge replied eventually. "I could not wait to do so, Lady Violet." There appeared to be a double meaning to his words, and Violet frowned hard, studying the man carefully. "There is a joy in my heart at being able to call upon you all at this present moment." His careful smile was directed towards Lady Arrington, who asked Lord Coatbridge to sit down.

Violet's stomach twisted as she took her seat once more, seeing the way that Lord Coatbridge continued to glance at her as he shifted in his seat, appearing a trifle uncomfortable. Whatever was the matter? Had she done or said something recently that had upset him in some way? Certainly, she had done a good deal of mortifying things, but they had only just begun to converse and laugh about her mistakes, to the point that she had felt herself quietly comfortable and content in his presence. Surely she would not have done something more to irritate or anger him.

"Might I ask if the Duke of Claverhouse has called today, Lady Violet?"

Violet looked back at him in surprise, just as the maid brought in the fresh tea tray. "The Duke?" she repeated, a little astonished that he should ask something such as that. Why would he think of the Duke of Claverhouse at this present moment? "No, he has not done as yet."

"Although we *are* to meet him at Hyde Park for the fashionable hour in only a *very* short time," Lady Arrington stated, sounding utterly delighted at such a thing. "You are a friend of the Duke's, I believe, are you not?"

Violet expected there to be an immediate response from Lord Coatbridge, expecting him to acknowledge that yes, he was a friend of the Duke's and that they had been so for some time, only for her to then see Lord Coatbridge hesitate. There was a short, strained silence before he finally answered, having opened his mouth three times to speak already, only to close it again each time.

"I—I know the Duke of Claverhouse from Eton, Lady Arrington," he said as Violet noted how he had not answered her mother's question. "He and I spent some very happy years there together, and since then, our acquaintance has grown a little. Although," he continued, spreading his hands, "I have not been in his company for too long recently. I was on the continent before my father died and have been working hard to improve the estate." Once more, his

gaze slid toward Violet and she made an effort to smile at him, although it was barely present given all that she was now feeling. Why the Duke was being mentioned in such a manner, she did not know. Was Lord Coatbridge attempting to express to her that he did not know the Duke's character as well as she might think? Why would such a thing matter to her?

"Oh, I understand," her mother said, throwing up her hands. "It is most difficult to return to society when one has been absent from it for some time. I confess that *I* have found it a little difficult myself, due to the fact that..."

Violet did not speak but allowed her mother to continue the conversation with Lord Coatbridge without interruption. She herself was watching him carefully, seeing how he continued to look at her whenever he could, his fingers twisting together as he held his clasped hands in his lap as though he was on the edge of saying something but could not quite bring himself to say it.

And then, the time came for the visit to end.

"I fear we must beg your forgiveness, Lord Coatbridge," her mother said brightly as the clock began to chime. "We are to make our way to Hyde Park for the fashionable hour."

"Yes," Lord Coatbridge replied, a little tightly. "I do recall you stating such a thing. You are to meet the Duke of Claverhouse there?"

Lady Arrington beamed at him, her hands clasped together in front of her. "Yes, certainly we are," she said, whilst Lord Coatbridge immediately began to frown. "Are you to go to Hyde Park, Lord Coatbridge? I am certain you will enjoy the afternoon if you do."

Lord Coatbridge rose to his feet. "I do not think I will manage to do so, unfortunately," he said gravely, his eyes once more turning towards Violet. "Good afternoon, Lady Mary. Lady Violet." He held her gaze steadily, seeming to want to communicate something to her without actually speaking. "Thank you, Lady Arrington."

Violet's heart beat a little more quickly as she found herself stepping forward, knowing that what she was about to do would be considered most improper but determined to do so regardless. There was something very odd about Lord Coatbridge's demeanor this afternoon and she was determined to discover what it was.

"Allow me to accompany you to the front door, Lord Coatbridge," she said, ignoring the startled look that jumped onto

her mother's features. "I will not be more than a few minutes, Mama."

"Violet—"

There was no time for Lady Arrington to say more, for Violet stepped forward at once and made her way quickly towards the door of the drawing room, waiting only for Lord Coatbridge to join her before she pushed it open. With a great swell of relief that her mother had not forbidden her from doing as she intended, Violet walked through it, only for Lord Coatbridge to instantly catch her hand in his.

"Lady Violet."

His voice was urgent, his fingers pressing to hers with a firmness that stole her breath.

"Lord Coatbridge, I—"

"Pray do not accept the Duke's proposal."

Violet stared at him blankly, shock rippling through her.

"I am greatly relieved that I have managed to call upon you before such a thing has taken place," he continued, stepping a little closer to her now, his eyes searching hers. "Lady Violet, there is more that I must say but I cannot do so for the present."

"Lord Coatbridge, I..." Her words were sticking in her throat as she looked up into his face and found herself quite overcome by all that she now felt. Waves of heat were searing through her, stealing her breath and rendering her a little unsteady. She did not understand all that Lord Coatbridge was saying and yet all she could think of was just how close to her he now stood.

"I am being much too forward, I know," Lord Coatbridge replied, his voice a low murmur that felt like a gentle caress across her skin. "You have every right to pull away from me, to demand that I do not speak so or that I give you a clear explanation as to what I mean, but the only thing I can offer you is the promise that I—I speak from my heart, Lady Violet."

She blinked rapidly, seeing the slight flush that now rose up in his face and realizing, with shock, that he was speaking of a care for her that he could not put into words. Her hand still held his and she pressed it gently, trying to compose herself so that she might speak a little more to him. At any moment, the door could open and her mother or her sister could step out, else a servant might walk from another room and see them standing in such an intimate manner, and then Violet knew her reputation might well be ruined. But, for

whatever reason, this did not seem to hold much significance for her. She did not want to pull away, did not want him to pull back from her at all. Instead, she wanted only to step closer, and it was by sheer force of will that she did not do so.

"You are trying to protect me," she said softly, seeing Lord Coatbridge nod. "From the Duke?" Frowning, she saw Lord Coatbridge's expression twist. "He is your friend."

A hard laugh ripped from Lord Coatbridge's throat. "Lady Violet, I do not know what he is to me at present," he said harshly. "But you are correct when you state that I am attempting to protect you." Once more, his eyes turned to meet hers and he spoke quietly but with great fervor. "Pray, do not accept the Duke's proposal, not until he has told you everything."

"Told me everything?" Violet repeated, not comprehending what such a thing meant. "I do not understand."

"There is more to his proposal than there appears," Lord Coatbridge stated, which still did not clarify anything that he had said thus far. "I do not know when it will come, Lady Violet, but when it does, you must know all that he has planned for your future together before you make a decision."

"I do not understand!" Violet grasped his other hand with her free one as though she intended to hold him in place until he told her everything. "What do you mean, Lord Coatbridge?"

For a few moments, it appeared as though Lord Coatbridge intended to answer her, but in the end, he shook his head and let out a ragged breath.

"I will give him the opportunity to speak the truth, Lady Violet," he said softly. "It is only right that I do so. But out of concern for you—and a fear that he will not—I must beg of you to be cautious and careful in your considerations. Although, if you wish to wed the Duke, then I can only give my congratulations." He cleared his throat, as though saying such things brought him great difficulty. "And a promise that I shall not speak of such things again." His brows lifted and he looked directly into her eyes. "The choice will be yours, Lady Violet."

And with that, his hands were pulled from hers and he was gone, walking along the hallway with long, determined strides that pulled him further away from her with every passing second. Violet stared after him, not at all comprehending what had been said and, deep down, now feeling a little afraid about what was to come.



\* \* \*

“Lord Coatbridge called this afternoon.”

Violet spoke as carelessly as she could manage, although continued to glance up at the Duke so that she might assess what his reaction to such news might be.

“We had Lord Fairweather also, and Lord Stafford,” she continued as the smile began to fade from the Duke’s expression. “Although I believe that Lord Fairweather will not be a great favorite, given his lack of consideration when it came to conversation.”

“Indeed.” The Duke’s brow furrowed, and he looked down at Violet for some moments as they walked together through the crowd, with Violet’s mother and sister behind them. “Lord Coatbridge and I had an enjoyable evening at the ball yesterday. You did dance with him, did you not?”

“Twice,” she confirmed, noting that he had immediately gone to speak of Lord Coatbridge rather than say anything about Lord Fairweather or Lord Stafford. “He is an excellent dancer, I must say.” Her compliment brought nothing but a darkness to the Duke’s expression although his forced smile was, she was sure, an attempt to remove such a look from himself.

“I am glad you found his company so enjoyable,” he replied, turning his head away from her as though gazing out across the park and the many gentlemen and ladies who had come to promenade. “He is a good friend, Lady Violet, as you know, but I do feel I should warn you of him.”

A sudden anxiety forced Violet’s heart into a quicker rhythm. “Warn me, Your Grace?” she said lightly. “Whatever of? Lord Coatbridge is only an acquaintance and—”

“An acquaintance that might ruin your reputation, should you permit him.” the Duke said, astonishing Violet entirely. “He is a friend of mine, as I have said, but there is a great defect to his

character which cannot be ignored. And, given that you have become *very* dear to me, Lady Violet, I cannot in good conscience, permit you to continue in such a way with him without allowing you to know of it."

It was as though everything she thought she knew of both the Duke and Lord Coatbridge was thrown together at once, swirling about in a great madness and confusion. Swallowing hard, Violet looked all about her so that she would not have to glance up at the Duke's face, feeling her heart pounding furiously as she fought to keep control of her emotions.

"You will not ask me about him?" the Duke said softly. "That is very wise of you, my dear lady. You are most proper, for most young ladies of my acquaintance would be very eager indeed to hear any such gossip, but you are proving yourself to be more genteel than they." He offered her his arm, and despite Violet's inner reluctance, she accepted it. "Lord Coatbridge is, as I have said, an excellent friend but there are many things about a gentleman that one must be wary of, when one is a young lady with an unsullied reputation."

A tightness came into Violet's throat. "You cannot mean to suggest that Lord Coatbridge would attempt to ruin my reputation, Your Grace," she replied, sounding greatly astonished. "For I know that such a thing could not possibly be true."

His brow lifted in evident surprise. "Is that so?" he asked, his tone gentle but a small sneer playing about his mouth. "And just how well do you know Lord Coatbridge, Lady Violet? Do you know him particularly well?"

Violet wanted to respond that she did not know the Duke particularly well either but chose to refrain, thinking it best to remain silent. Her hands were a little sweaty, but she tightened them into fists and forced herself to remain outwardly calm and quiet, so that the Duke might speak with as much openness as he pleased.

"I know you do not," the Duke continued, barely giving her more than a few seconds to respond. "You are not closely acquainted with him, as I have been. He is a gentleman who cares naught for a lady's reputation. All he thinks of is his own pleasures." One shoulder lifted. "I would tell you what he has been speaking of—*who* he has been speaking of recently—if I did not fear that it would distress you."

“No, please,” Violet responded quickly, looking up at the Duke now and hearing the eagerness in her voice. “Please, if you wish me to know what you are speaking of, then you cannot deny me an example of it. Whatever it is you were to say, Your Grace, I would beg of you to continue.” She tilted her head as he looked back at her, hoping that her slightly coy expression would urge him to continue. “After all, if you care enough about me to warn me of Lord Coatbridge, surely you care enough to share with me even one particular, so I might be even more aware of what you speak of.”

This seemed to convince the Duke, for he let out a long sigh but immediately began to speak.

“You know that I care for you, Lady Violet,” he said, his words filled with a firmness that would have convinced Violet, had she not been on her guard. “I speak this way simply because of my concern for you. It distresses me to tell you of this, but Lord Coatbridge has recently been speaking of a Mrs. Westerton.”

Violet frowned. “Mrs. Westerton?” she repeated, the name meaning nothing to her.

“She is the mistress of Lord Johnstone,” the Duke said plainly, sending a wave of shock through Violet. “But Lord Coatbridge is determined that he will steal her from the fellow, regardless of what it will do to his own reputation.” He sighed again as Violet felt a coldness begin to wrap around her. “He is selfish and utterly arrogant,” he finished as Violet closed her eyes, trying to take in his words without outward reaction. “Whatever he wants, he will do whatever he needs to in order to gain it...even to you, Lady Violet.”

Her eyes flew open, and she stopped walking, turning her head so that she might look at the Duke.

“If he wishes to steal you from another,” the Duke said, each word spoken slowly but with great consideration, “then he will do whatever he can to do it. He will not offer matrimony or the like but will instead seek to gain whatever he wishes from you whilst ruining your reputation in the process. You must be on your guard, Lady Violet. Lord Coatbridge is not a man to be trifled with.”

It took all of Violet’s inner strength for her to nod and murmur a thanks, hardly feeling the sunshine that blazed down from above as the chill began to spread from her heart all through her. Everything Lady Lydia had told her about the Duke came back to her mind repeatedly, but the words the Duke had spoken also continued to ring true. She did *not* know Lord Coatbridge particularly well and

had not been long acquainted with him. Did she really know his true character? Or was there any truth in what the Duke had told her of him?



## 9

Samuel had been unable to sleep. Having heard all that the Duke had said about Lady Violet and his intentions for her future, Samuel had not been able to forget it. He had tossed and turned, telling himself over and over that he would give the Duke the opportunity to go to her and tell her of his intentions and plans so that Lady Violet would not accept any proposal without being aware of it, but still, he could not sleep. Thus, when the following afternoon had come, he had made his way to Lord Arrington's home and had prayed for an opportunity to speak to Lady Violet.

He had been granted it. There had been a curiosity and then an uncertainty in her eyes as she had looked at him, evidently seeing the way he was looking at her and realizing that he needed to say more than he could in front of Lady Arrington. The boldness of her manner when she left the room before him had bolstered his intentions and he had been unable to help himself from grasping her hand.

In fairness to the Duke, he had not told her everything, had not been explicit in his message, but Samuel prayed he had said enough for Lady Violet to be on her guard. Now all that was required of Samuel was to speak to the Duke himself, and if the Duke of Claverhouse refused to say anything to the lady and intended fully to keep her in the dark about what her future would be should she accept his proposal, then Samuel would have no other choice but to tell her everything himself.

Sighing, he ran one hand over his eyes. He had been invited to a soiree this evening but had sent his apologies, citing an ill head, but the truth of the matter was that he had no intention of enjoying any such thing whilst he had the Duke on his mind. He knew where his friend would be this evening and fully expected that the Duke would be in White's again thereafter, which was when Samuel intended to confront him. All he had to do until then was think about what he would say and how he would say it.

"My lord?"

The butler stood in the doorway, looking somewhat hesitant.

Samuel lifted his head and beckoned him forward, realizing that he had, most likely, already knocked but had been given no response.

“Yes, Peters?”

“There are three separate notes for you, my lord,” the butler began in his usual detached tone. “In addition, given that you asked for any progress as regarded the small boy below stairs, my lord, the child states that he is feeling much better and wishes very much to be of use to you.”

Samuel smiled suddenly, his spirits lifted. “Is that so?” he asked, seeing the butler nod. “Is he able to walk about?”

The butler sniffed. “I believe he was attempting to run about the garden this afternoon, my lord,” he replied without so much as a glimmer of a smile. “The maids were doing their best to prevent him, but he is quite determined.”

Samuel chuckled, sitting back in his chair and regarding the butler carefully. He could not tell whether or not Peters thought well of George or if he was somewhat frustrated at having a child about the place. “Then you may send him up to me for a short discussion about what he might do about this place,” he said as the butler’s expressionless face regarded him. “And I will, of course, remind him to obey whatever orders you give him, Peters. Will that be of any assistance to you?”

The butler’s round face broke into a small, slightly wry smile as he nodded, betraying a bit of relief for only a few moments. “It will, my lord,” he replied. “I thank you.”

Samuel smiled to himself as he watched his butler take his leave. Clearly, George had been making a nuisance of himself below stairs, although Samuel’s butler had decided that it was not of enough importance to speak to Samuel about. Samuel had to admit he was glad to know that the boy was not lingering in his state of quiet fear that Samuel had seen when he had first arrived. Whatever the boy was afraid of, Samuel did not yet know, but at least George knew that here, he was safe.

“You wanted to see me?”

The door to Samuel’s study was pushed open and Samuel lifted his head in surprise, only to see the small boy walking boldly into the room, whilst a scarlet-cheeked maid scurried after him, making to drag the child out again.

“I am so sorry, my lord,” she squeaked as Samuel rose to his feet. “I didn’t think he would just—”

"That is quite all right." Samuel waved a hand, dismissing her concerns. "George, the next time you are summoned to my door, you do not simply walk into the room without waiting."

The small boy's brows lifted. "But you sent for me."

"That is true, I did," Samuel replied, chuckling, "but there is still the expectation that you will knock and then wait for me to call for you to enter." Sending the maid away, he sat back down in his chair and looked across his desk at the small boy, seeing the color in his face and the brightness in his eyes. "Now, I am told that you were attempting to run across the gardens today."

A cloud came over the boy's expression. "I couldn't quite do it."

"But you will, very soon," Samuel replied encouragingly. "Your leg does not pain you any longer?"

George's lips twisted. "A little," he said slowly, "but when I rest, it goes away."

"Excellent." Leaning on his desk, Samuel sat forward. "Then perhaps it is time that you have some employment to keep your days busy."

Instantly, the child's expression brightened. "Really?"

"If you still wish to work for me, then yes," Samuel replied, seeing the boy's fervent nod. "You will be treated well here, George. If there is ever anything of concern that is said or done to you, then you are to come to me without hesitation. Do you understand?"

There was an air of solemnness between them now and after only a few moments, George nodded seriously.

"Good," Samuel continued quickly. "Then I think I shall set you as the errand boy for this house. That means," he explained, seeing the slight frown cross George's face, "that you are to do whatever Peters asks of you. The cook, Mrs. Mitchell, also." Tipping his head just a little, he studied the boy's features, trying to make out what he was thinking. "That will mean going out from this house carrying messages and notes or going to collect certain items from various other establishments. Is that something you think you can do?"

There was a deep frown settling over the boy's face as Samuel spoke. He now bit his lip, his eyes darting away as Samuel waited for him to respond. The fear that Samuel had believed to be absent was slowly returning and this time, Samuel was determined to find out where such fear came from.

"What is it, George?" he asked gently. "You do not want to leave

this house?"

George's eyes rounded as Samuel stated exactly what it was that he was afraid of. "What if I am caught?"

"By the person you were working for before?" Samuel asked, and George nodded. "I do not think that is likely. This house is a great distance from where you were first found, and I do not think that they would be able to recognize you either, given just how much you have improved." Smiling, Samuel continued to speak as encouragingly as he could. "If you do not return, however, then I will simply go in search of this man and demand that he release you. Will that satisfy your fear?"

There was no immediate response from George, for he continued to look back at Samuel with wide eyes, clearly assessing whether or not this was something that he could accept. There was an obvious and strong fear that held him back, but Samuel knew that the child could not simply live within these four walls. Patiently, he waited for George to make his decision, deciding himself that he would not press him or force him into doing what Samuel himself wanted, not if the boy was not yet ready.

"That means I will have to tell you about him."

Samuel nodded slowly, spreading his hands. "It does," he said quietly. "But you need not fear anything from me. You know that I can be trusted, I hope. I am not about to return you to the streets of London, not after I have spent so much on you, making certain that you are well." He let the corner of his mouth tip up and a tiny smile lifted George's lips in return. "You are much too valuable, George. Now," he continued, clasping his hands together and setting his arms on the table in what he hoped was a firm yet unthreatening manner. "You said that this man makes you fetch as many coins as you can. And, once you have done so, this man then gives all the money to another."

"To a posh one, like you."

A quick grin spread across Samuel's face. "Yes, that is right," he agreed, hearing no spite in the boy's voice. "You do not know who this gentleman is, however."

"No."

"Nor why he demands such monies from you all."

The boy shrugged. "I asked but got a clip around the ear for my trouble," he muttered darkly. "We weren't allowed to ask about him. It didn't seem fair, though. We went to bed with nothing but a

crust of bread in our bellies and he comes in with his horse and takes all that we've made." His brow furrowed and he looked hard at Samuel. "Why should someone with so much money want the tuppence that we scrape together?"

"I could not say," Samuel replied honestly. "But for the moment, this gentleman does not matter. What *does* matter is that you give me the name of the man who made you do such things."

George shook his head, and for a moment, Samuel feared that the boy would not tell him. But then a deep and heavy sigh shook the boy's frame.

"He told us we couldn't leave," he said, dropping his head and speaking down into his hands. "One boy tried, but then the next day, he was dragged up in front of us." He shuddered. "I don't know what they did, but he's never spoken again. Not a word. He just does what he has to and then goes to sit by himself, not looking at anyone and not speaking a word."

"You have nothing to fear," Samuel replied firmly. "I will not let such a thing happen. In fact," he continued, a sense of resolve now filling his heart as he heard the dreadful things George had to say, "I will find this man and, in whatever way I can, will bring an end to his endeavors."

George's eyes rounded and the color drained from his face.

"You need not fear," Samuel repeated, leaning forward a little more. "I have friends who can assist me in this matter. You will be free from this man's threat and the boys who are still doing what you yourself were forced to will be free also."

George closed his eyes, his small frame seeming to tremble for a moment. Samuel could only wait, praying that the boy would be willing to tell him the truth, would be willing to trust that, regardless of how afraid he might be, Samuel would be able to do as he said.

"Franks," he said suddenly. "I don't know anything other than that. He's called Franks and he lives on Cornwallis Road, near to the workhouse." He closed his eyes again. "I think that's where he got most of us from. Said he'd save us from the workhouse and give us everything we needed."

"Thank you, George," Samuel said quietly as the boy opened his eyes, now looking very pale. "And you do not know anything about this other gentleman? The one who received the money from Franks?"

The boy swallowed hard, shaking his head before he bit his lip, glancing up at Samuel as though he needed to be certain he could be trusted. "I—I think that his name was a bit like yours," he said, making Samuel go very still as a sudden, horrific thought hit him. "I only heard it once, and I couldn't tell you what it was exactly, but..." He shrugged and looked away, his head lowering and his shoulders lifting just a little as though he were afraid of what Samuel might do next.

Samuel, however, was caught up with one terrible idea. He was now staring down at his hands, not lifting his head to look at George nor even being aware of his presence. Could it be? Was it at all possible that the small boy he had rescued was now revealing to him an even darker truth about a gentleman he had long considered a friend?

"My...my lord?"

George's quiet, uncertain voice brought Samuel back to the present and he looked back at the boy, forcing a smile to his face that he did not truly feel.

"Forgive me, George," he said solemnly. "I have much to think on. However," he continued, clearing his throat, "I think it best that you do not start any duties until this 'Franks' is dealt with." George rose from his chair, his eyes still fixed to Samuel's. "Would that content you?"

"You are being awful kind to me, my lord," George replied, blinking rapidly in what Samuel believed was an attempt to hide his tears. "I don't know why you are, but I'm grateful for it, truly I am."

Samuel smiled back at the boy and then made a shooin' motion with his hands. "You deserve a little kindness, George," he said softly. "Now, take yourself downstairs and make sure that the cook knows I sent you down to her so that she might feed you." He chuckled as the boy's eyes brightened, only for the sound to die in his throat as the door flew open, forcing George to stumble back.

"Coatbridge."

Samuel rose quickly, seeing the way George stared up at the Duke and, therefore, giving a hard look to the nearby footman who had hurried in after the Duke of Claverhouse in order to announce him. The footman nodded and tugged George away, leaving Samuel and the Duke to stand alone together.

"Claverhouse," he replied, a little tightly. "Whatever are you doing here?" There was a little shock now running through him as

he sat back down, gesturing for the Duke to do the same. He had never expected the Duke of Claverhouse to call upon him, having always intended to speak to him once he was in White's and, therefore, a little merrier than he was at present.

"I am on my way to some ball or other," the Duke began, sitting down in a chair near to Samuel and looking all about him in apparent interest at his surroundings, "and then I recalled that, after the last ball I attended, you were forced to speak to me openly about one or two things." He tilted his head, his eyes rather sharp as they studied Samuel. "What did we speak of?"

Samuel frowned. "You do not recall?" he asked, a little disbelievingly. "I know that you were rather merry, but—"

"I *do* recall mentioning Lady Violet to you," the Duke interrupted, waving a hand lazily. "However, I cannot recall the specifics of what I said."

Biting back a sharp retort, Samuel took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Your Grace," he began, speaking to the Duke in a much more formal manner, "you mentioned to me that you intended to wed Lady Violet for nothing more than the dowry she will bring and the money that will come to her—and, therefore, to you—after she is wed and once her father passes from this life to the next." He shrugged, as though what had been told to him was not of any real significance at all. "You also stated that you were in great difficulty as regards your wealth, for you have made ridiculous decisions and thus, have lost a good deal of your fortune. I imagine that marrying Lady Violet would bring something of a relief to your present circumstances."

The Duke chuckled but Samuel did not join in. Rather, he sat steadfastly, looking back at his former friend with a firm gaze. He no longer considered the Duke a friend given his behavior and his intentions and was content to make that clear, should it come to it. "I have demanded, and will continue to insist, that you tell the lady the truth of your situation and what your intentions for her future would be, should she decide to wed you."

A hard, cruel laugh ripped from the Duke's mouth. "And whyever should I do that?" he asked, staring back at Samuel as though he were being utterly ridiculous. "A lady would never accept me based on such circumstances."

"She may," Samuel challenged. "She may wish for the title of duchess above anything else. But it is not fair, and it would not be

right to enter into a betrothal when the lady knows none of this.”

“And you will tell her?”

Samuel, hearing the threat in the Duke’s voice, lifted his chin. “I will inform her if you do not,” he replied calmly. “I think it only fair.”

The Duke’s harsh laugh seemed to shake the room, but Samuel remained steadfast, standing tall and keeping his gaze fixed upon him. He had every intention of doing as he had stated regardless of whether or not the Duke wished to do so.

“I presume this is because you have an interest in Lady Violet yourself, do you not?”

Samuel felt his skin prickle but remained quite stoic, refusing to let the Duke goad him into speaking impetuously.

“If it were any other young lady, I doubt you would be so determined to do what you think to be right.”

“I would,” Samuel stated firmly. “You are poor, Claverhouse. You are seeking a way out of your troubles by marrying a young lady of fortune, with the sole intention of abandoning her at your estate whilst you continue to enjoy your life in any way you see fit.” He threw up his hands. “There is nothing but evil in that, Claverhouse.”

The Duke said nothing for some moments. Instead, he simply regarded Samuel carefully, as though he did not know what it was he wanted to say. Then, as Samuel continued to wait, feeling the tension begin to crackle between himself and the Duke, the man rose to his feet and walked close to where Samuel stood.

“You will regret this choice, Coatbridge,” he murmured, his voice low and menacing although Samuel did not flinch. “I will do as I please and I will *not* have you preventing me from my chosen course of action.”

“Your threats mean nothing.”

One finger pressed hard against Samuel’s shoulder, but he did nothing more than lift his chin. He did not step back or even flinch. Instead, he looked in the Duke’s face and wondered how he had ever thought of this man as his friend.

“I *need* this money,” the Duke stated. “And I will not be bent to your will. Keep yourself away from my life and my business, Coatbridge. Or it will be all the worse for you.”

With that, the Duke dropped his hand and turned on his heel, walking sharply towards the door. Throwing it open, he stormed



through it and let it slam closed behind him, leaving his threats to echo all around Samuel. Dropping his head, Samuel let out a long, slow breath. This was what he had feared. It appeared that there was a great darkness to the Duke's character, a darkness that Samuel had never once expected.

"That was him."

Starting violently, Samuel looked up to see George slowly entering the room. "George?" he said uncertainly. "I..." Closing his eyes, he gave himself a small shake. "I did not realize you were listening outside my door."

"That was the man," George said again, his voice a little louder. "The man who Franks gives the money to. I swear to you, my lord, that was him."

Samuel held up both hands, ignoring the way his heart slammed hard against his chest. "I believe you, George," he said, making certain to keep his voice low and quiet. "That gentleman who was with us just now, the one who just departed, it was *he* who commanded Franks?"

The boy nodded, his face white.

"Then I think it best that you remain in this townhouse for the present," Samuel replied calmly. "George, you have done me a great service. I am very grateful. Be assured that I will make certain that Franks does not continue in his ways and that the other children will soon be safe."

The boy nodded and, with only a tiny smile, stepped out of the room, leaving Samuel alone. The silence became oppressive, and Samuel sank back into his chair, closing his eyes tightly as the truth of it all bored into his heart. He had been entirely mistaken about the Duke, it seemed. He was not the honorable gentleman Samuel had always believed him to be. To be involved in such a thing, to use children in such an ill way made Samuel almost nauseous with horror. A determination grew up within him that he would make certain that the children would be made safe, even if it meant taking them all in himself. They could not continue on in such a life, not when they had already experienced such horror. One look into George's frightened face had forced Samuel's resolution—he would show them that not all gentlemen of the *ton* were so cruel. His shoulders straightened. He would summon the rector local to the area of London Franks worked in and would make certain that all would go as he intended. The other children would be safe.

Franks would be stopped and that would only leave the Duke of Claverhouse himself to be dealt with.

Samuel dropped his head into his hands.

The Duke of Claverhouse was nothing but an inconsiderate, selfish, and entirely devious gentleman who treated those around him as though they were nothing but tools for his enterprise, no matter how dark that enterprise might be. The last thing he wanted was for Lady Violet to tie herself to such a man for the rest of her days, not if she did not know the truth of his character. And yet Samuel could not help but believe that the Duke's threats were sincere, but he had no notion of what might be planned for him as a consequence should he speak to Lady Violet.

Just what was he to do?

# 10

The soiree last evening had been a pleasant one, but Violet could not help but feel concerned. Lord Coatbridge had not been present. Given how he had spoken to her and what he had told her—and also what he had left unsaid—Violet was both frustrated and upset that she had not seen him again. On top of which, everything the Duke had said of him still lingered in her mind, making her repeatedly question whether Lord Coatbridge was the gentleman she truly believed him to be.

“My dear!”

Violet, who had been standing by the window and looking out at the street below, turned to see her mother rushing into the room. Her eyes were wide but bright, a delighted smile on her face and color pouring into her cheeks. With outstretched hands, she practically ran towards Violet, grasping her hands in her own.

“He has written to ask your father’s permission,” Lady Arrington said, her voice so loud that it seemed to fill the room. “He is soon to ask you to marry him, Violet.”

It took Violet a few moments to realize what her mother was saying. Blinking rapidly, she took in Lady Arrington’s expression and slowly came to the understanding that the Duke of Claverhouse had written to her father in order to seek his permission for their marriage.

She could not breathe.

“You are to be a duchess,” her mother said, just as Lady Mary came into the room, alongside their cousin, Miss Walters, no doubt brought into their company by the noise that Lady Arrington was making. “Can you believe it, Violet? You have captured his interest and will be the Duchess of Claverhouse.”

“What?”

Violet pressed one hand to her heart, swallowing hard as, much to her astonishment, tears began to threaten her. Her mother, in answer to Lady Mary’s question, bounded over to her and said the very same as she had said to Violet, whilst Miss Walters simply stared back at Violet with an inscrutable expression.

“Mama,” she said, trying to speak loudly but in turn, hearing only a whisper escape from her throat. Swallowing hard, she tried again. “Mama.”

Lady Arrington turned. “Yes, my dear, *dear* girl?” she asked warmly, coming back towards Violet and grasping her hand. “What have you to ask me? If it is about the proposal itself, then I confess that I do not know anything about when it might take place.”

Violet shook her head, feeling tears begin to burn in her eyes. “Mama, what if...” She could barely force the words out, seeing just how excited her mother was and knowing that she would soon bring such an emotion to an end. “Would you and father be very angry if I did not accept him?”

The expression on Lady Arrington’s face changed in an instant. Her smile fractured and her face turned pale as she stared back at Violet, seemingly utterly overcome with astonishment at this particular remark. Violet did not regret speaking so, however, for there had been no joy or delight in her heart upon hearing that the Duke intended to propose. Instead, there had come a deep and unsettling fear that had burned its way into her very soul, telling her that she had no confidence in the Duke or his proposal. She realized now that the way he had spoken of Lord Coatbridge was merely a defense against what Lord Coatbridge had said of him. Lord Coatbridge had been the honorable one, for he had come to warn her without speaking the truth in its entirety, allowing for the Duke himself to do as he ought.

The Duke of Claverhouse had spoken nothing but lies and untruths about Lord Coatbridge, she was sure of it now. And certainly, Violet had no desire to accept such a gentleman’s proposal. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her sister and her cousin exchange a look, although it was one of relief rather than sorrow. It appeared that they both were glad at Violet’s considerations and would support her in her decision, even if her mother, who now appeared to be on the point of tears, did not.

“You...you would not accept him?” Lady Arrington’s voice was barely loud enough for Violet to hear, although the grip on Violet’s hand had become a good deal tighter now.

“I do not think I would, Mama,” Violet replied gently. “The Duke of Claverhouse does not bear a fine character, and it is because of such a thing that I would consider refusing him.” There came a lump in her throat as she saw how her mother blinked

rapidly, clearly overwhelmed with all that Violet had said. She did not want to hurt or injure either of her parents, but at the same time, Violet prayed desperately that her father would not force her to accept the Duke.

“We have always promised that you should make your own decision as regards matrimony, Violet.” Lady Arrington drew in a deep breath, pinned Violet with a severe look, and dropped her hand. “Although I will inform you now that I believe you to be utterly foolish. The Duke of Claverhouse is a *fine* man, and all in the *ton* can see it. Why you have such a ridiculous notion in your head, I cannot imagine...unless...” Leaning forward, she peered into Violet’s face. “Unless it is that you care for another?”

“I will speak to father myself, if it is required,” Violet said quietly, making certain not to answer her mother’s question even though, at that very moment, Lord Coatbridge had jumped into her mind. “I am truly sorry, Mama.”

Lady Arrington said nothing for some minutes. She continued to study Violet with a sharp eye, only to then turn abruptly and almost flounce from the room. Violet closed her eyes and let out a long breath, reaching out one hand so that she might grasp the back of the nearby chair for support.

“I think you have made a wise decision, Violet.”

Lady Mary was by her side in an instant, whilst Miss Walters rang the bell for tea. “The Duke is not all that the *ton* believes him to be.”

“Nor all that my aunt believes him to be also,” Miss Walters murmured as Lady Mary led Violet to a chair so that she might sit down. “I believe I would have more concern for you should you have chosen to accept him.”

Violet managed a small smile, suddenly feeling very weary. “I am glad to hear it, although I do believe that the Duke’s proposal is a very genuine one.” Her smile faded and she looked away from her sister and cousin. “I cannot be certain that he has any true regard for me, not after what Lord Coatbridge told me.”

Her sister and cousin both nodded, having previously been informed of all that Lord Coatbridge had said.

“It is a pity that Lord Coatbridge was not present last evening, so that you might have spoken to him again,” Miss Walters said, just as the maid brought in the tea tray. “Will he be at the ball this evening, do you think?”

Lifting one shoulder in a small shrug, Violet let out a long, heavy breath. "I can but hope," she said softly, thinking quietly to herself that she would need to do all she could to avoid being in the Duke's company for too long, for fear that he might attempt to propose in the midst of the crowd. Her refusal then would be a good deal more difficult to give and would certainly send the *ton* into an uproar. "I *must* speak to Lord Coatbridge again. The Duke has said nothing more save to throw aspersions on Lord Coatbridge himself, and I am left flummoxed."

Lady Mary reached across and patted Violet's hand in what was meant to be a comforting gesture. "He will be there," she said encouragingly. "I am sure of it."



\* \* \*

Lady Mary's certainty was not to be proven correct, however. Try as she might, Violet simply could not see Lord Coatbridge anywhere about, and the ball had been underway for at least two hours. She had been forced to smile and to laugh and to converse as though all was right in the world, although her mother had been somewhat tight-lipped and pale.

Violet had been forced to endure something of a tirade from her mother shortly before they had left for the ball. Lady Arrington had been most upset, fearful of the scandal that Violet's refusal would bring upon their good name, although Violet assured her that she would do all she could to make certain that the *ton* never knew of it. That would depend entirely on the Duke, of course, but Violet was determined to keep the matter as quiet as possible.

Her father had summoned Violet to his study so that he might speak to her about it also, but he had been much more at ease than her mother. Given that her father was very well settled, with an excellent fortune and estate as well as an heir to continue the family

line, he did not have particular expectations as regarded his daughters' futures. So long as *they* were satisfied in the match, and so long as they did not marry below themselves, he would be content. Lady Arrington had cried overlong about how Violet was throwing away the very best opportunity that might come to her during this Season, but Violet had remained unchanged in her opinion. Regardless of when and how the Duke proposed, Violet would not accept. What he would do thereafter, she could not say.

"Lady Violet."

The voice of the only gentleman she had not wished to see came to her, and she sighed inwardly, although made certain to place a bright smile on her face also. "Your Grace," she said as warmly as she could. "Good evening."

"I did not think we should ever see you, Your Grace," Lady Arrington said, reaching out to press Violet's hand as though in doing so, she might convince her daughter to reconsider what the Duke was to ask her. "This ball is so very busy, and there are a good many young ladies who will be seeking your company."

"But I have made certain to save some dances for you, Lady Violet," the Duke replied, turning to speak to Violet even though it had been her mother who had commented. "I am sure you have done the same?"

Violet, who had not managed to secure all of her dances this evening, was forced to hand over her dance card, albeit in a somewhat rueful manner as she saw the look in the Duke's eyes. He wrote his name down and then handed it back to her in a triumphant manner, as though he were seeking to claim a prize and had managed to do so without difficulty. Violet herself felt nothing but anxiety and fear, worrying about what her mother would think or say in the following few minutes and praying desperately that the Duke would not think of proposing to her at this very moment. There was a slight suspicion in her heart that her mother would encourage the Duke to make his proposal public in the hope that Violet would be unable to withstand the pressure from those around her, full in the knowledge of the scandal that would be caused should she refuse, and would, therefore, accept.

"Your Grace, I do wonder that such an evening is so very full of dancing and the like," Lady Arrington said, gesturing to Violet. "My daughter has expressed such an eagerness to be in your company and you shall only have two dances to share together." Tutting

loudly, she shook her head in evident exasperation. "I am sorry that you shall only have a short time to speak together."

The Duke's eyes gleamed as he looked back towards Violet, perhaps believing that this encouragement came from her through her mother, and there was nothing Violet could do to prevent him from thinking such a way. Sending a hard look towards her mother, she then dropped her gaze, waiting for the Duke to respond.

"I should be very glad to take a turn about the room with Lady Violet, if she should wish it?" the Duke said, and Lady Arrington said loudly that this would be the most wonderful notion. "Although I fear I cannot do so at present, for I am already engaged to another for the next dance." Dropping into a low bow, he looked at Violet steadily, and her eyes were drawn to his as though she had no choice but to look back at him. "Might you wish to take a short turn about the room with me thereafter, Lady Violet?" he asked, his words and his eyes holding a great deal of meaning. "Your sister or cousin can accompany us, should they wish it."

Violet did not know what to say. She wanted to be truthful, wanted to say that she did not want to walk with the Duke anywhere, but respectful manners refused to permit her to do so. Instead, she glanced at Lady Mary and Miss Walters for support, seeing their meaningful glances and silent encouragement. Lifting her chin, she turned back to the Duke to respond, only for her mother to interrupt.

"You see how overcome she is, Your Grace," she said, putting a hand on his arm. "Such consideration is more than my daughter could ever expect. I know just how glad she would be to remain in your company for however long you choose."

"Capital." The Duke gave Violet a small bow, a smile pulling at one corner of his mouth. "I will return soon, Lady Violet."

Her shoulders slumped and her smile faded, but Lady Arrington was triumphant. Quite certain that the Duke should propose very soon, and that Violet herself would be swayed into accepting, she began to lecture Violet on her inadequate responses and her lack of consideration when it came to responding to the Duke. Violet was only saved from the rest of the conversation by Lord Arbuckle, who arrived to claim the next dance, although her heart remained deeply troubled as she stepped forward onto the dance floor.

This evening would not be a pleasant one, and it would certainly not hold any delightful memories. She could only pray that it would



pass quickly and that the Duke would, in time, seek to find another. Regardless of what her mother wished, Violet could not accept the Duke's proposal. Her heart, she feared, was beginning to ache for another.



\* \* \*

"I am sure that you have heard the news."

Violet's stomach twisted as she walked alongside the Duke, her arm pulled through his. She had not wanted to walk with him, but it would have been churlish to refuse, and thus, she had done so without question. "Oh?"

"I am sure that your father and mother have informed you of my letter."

Violet frowned, seeing the Duke turn towards the door and finding herself being led from the ballroom. "Your Grace, I—"

"Your mother will not mind," he stated firmly. "Come, Lady Violet. There is something that I must speak to you of in private."

Feeling her heart begin to quicken, Violet tried not to pull away but found herself beginning to recoil inwardly from the Duke of Claverhouse. He was behaving in a most improper fashion, for to pull a young lady from the ballroom without any proper chaperone could be construed as scandalous. "Your Grace, I do not feel comfortable leaving the ballroom," she said as the door closed behind them both. "I wish to return."

The Duke laughed, but Violet pulled her hand from his arm, tugging herself away from him. "Do excuse me."

She made to turn, but the Duke reached out and caught her arm, his fingers tight and the smile on his face becoming rather unpleasant.

"Your mother is aware of what is taking place, Lady Violet," he said resolutely. "She is in complete agreement. Besides, there can be

no great scandal for there is no one else here to see us, and the footmen," he gestured to those on either side of the ballroom door, "will make certain that no other guest enters this way for the short duration we are here." This was said to comfort her, Violet was certain, but she felt nothing but fear. Despite the Duke's assurances, despite his promise that she would not be in any way endangering her reputation, she remained deeply uncertain and unwilling.

"Come." The Duke's hand was strong, and Violet struggled to resist him.

"Please, allow me to return."

"But I have something of great importance to ask you," the Duke said, reaching for the door handle of what Violet presumed was a small parlor or the like. "And we must have privacy for such an important moment."

Violet's heart was in her throat as she found herself being pulled towards the door. She did not want to struggle or cry out for fear of attracting attention—the Duke's promise that her reputation would not be in any danger rang hollow—and yet she did not want to be in the same room as the Duke without anyone else present.

Her mind began to cloud with fear. Perhaps he knew that she intended to refuse and was doing whatever he could to make certain she could not. Was his intention to ruin her so that she had no choice but to wed him? Was there someone else waiting for them within this room that would force her hand?

The Duke laughed and murmured some more encouragements before turning the door handle and pushing it open.

Violet's whole body went limp. The room was well lit, with candles on almost every surface and a fire burning hot, making the room feel airless. But it was not the heat or the light that struck her. Rather, it was the sight of the gentleman that lay on the chaise longue, his head lolling to one side. His cravat was lying on the floor beside him, and the top of his shirt was open, with one arm spread out towards the floor as though he had been trying to reach his cravat but could not. His eyes were tightly closed, his mouth ajar in an evident state of drunkenness.

*Lord Coatbridge.*

"Goodness!" The Duke's shock sounded real enough, but he did not close the door again. Rather, he stepped inside a little more, whilst Violet remained precisely where she was, attempting to gain control of herself. Her eyes were fixed upon Lord Coatbridge, her

entire body feeling cold and stiff. Part of her feared that he was dead, whilst another began to wonder just what it was that the marquess was doing here.

A yelp of surprise made Violet start and she forced herself to walk into the room, horrified to set eyes upon a lady who, it seemed, had just emerged from an adjoining door.

“Good gracious,” Violet heard the Duke say, his tone one of utter bewilderment. “Mrs. Westerton.”

Her heart sank. She had heard that name before. The Duke had told her, had he not, that Lord Coatbridge was eager to snatch Mrs. Westerton—the mistress of another gentleman—for himself? It appeared that he was doing so now.

“I—I think we should depart, Your Grace.”

The Duke turned his head towards her, his eyes wide with surprise. “This is my dear friend, Lady Violet,” he said slowly, gesturing towards Lord Coatbridge. “I should make certain that he is quite all right.”

She blinked rapidly, her breathing shallow as she looked from Lord Coatbridge to the Duke and back again. “Y-yes,” she stammered, backing away from the room and looking back towards the ballroom. “Do excuse me, Your Grace.”

The Duke waved his hand towards her, but Violet did not see him do so, turning quickly so that she might hurry away. She reached the ballroom door, her heart pounding furiously and with every intention of returning to her mother just as soon as she could, only to stop dead.

The ball was still in full swing, and to be back amongst the laughter and the music and the conversation brought Violet a small comfort and, with it, a sudden thought that prevented her from making her way directly back towards her mother and sister. The Duke had spoken to her of Mrs. Westerton only a short time ago. Was it not now a little convenient for that particular lady to make an appearance in the very room where the Duke had meant to take her in order to propose?

*What if Lord Coatbridge is in danger?*

Her breath caught. If that was possible, if the Duke had done something in order to bring damage to Lord Coatbridge’s reputation, then his only chance of being saved from such dire consequences was through her. She would have to return, would have to try to waken him from his stupor...if such a thing were

possible. Her stomach tightened. She might well be wrong, however. If Lord Coatbridge *was* as he now appeared, then she could be risking her own reputation. Closing her eyes, Violet pressed one hand against her stomach in an attempt to calm herself. She had to make a decision, knowing that each choice would bring with it consequences that might never be removed.

What was she going to do?

All Samuel wanted to do was sleep. Why someone was trying to waken him at what was certainly a most ungodly hour, he could not understand. Moaning, he turned his head away and felt it press against something that was not as soft as he had expected. He would have to speak to his housekeeper about this. Pillows ought to be a good deal softer than that.

“Lord Coatbridge.”

The whispered voice only just made it into his consciousness before Samuel pressed it away again. Sleep had too great a hold on him and he did not want to be removed from its embrace.

“Lord Coatbridge, you *must* wake up.”

It was not a voice that he recognized, for it seemed to undulate and ripple all around him. It was very insistent, however, and as Samuel forced himself to listen to it, he felt something hard pressing down on his shoulder.

“Ouch!”

This seemed to bring him to a little more alertness, for the stabbing against his shoulder had become all the more relentless. His eyes felt heavy, and he struggled hard to open them, still feeling the pull of sleep drawing him back.

“If you do not waken now, Lord Coatbridge, then I must depart.” The voice was becoming a little more urgent and, slowly, Samuel began to realize that it was the voice of a woman. “Pray, do whatever you can to waken.”

Eventually, Samuel managed to open his eyes, finding his vision blurred and almost painful as he tried to focus on the face before him. Realizing that he was lying down, he tried to push himself up to sitting, only for his head to scream with pain. Letting out a small cry, he fell back against the cushions, only for the lady to grasp his hand and force him to sit up again.

“If you care for your reputation in any way, you *must* depart, Lord Coatbridge,” she hissed—and, with shock, Samuel realized it was none other than Lady Violet who now held his hand. “Please, listen to me. Rouse your strength if you have any and make your

way from this place.”

Despite the agony that was in his head, despite his confusion and his weakness, Samuel forced himself to his feet. He tried to speak, but his tongue felt too big for his mouth, his head dropping forward as, with a groan, he rose to his feet. Samuel staggered, squeezing his eyes closed tightly, but Lady Violet was there beside him, her hand tight on his as she half dragged him towards the door. He did not know what was happening, could not understand what was going on, but he knew that he could trust Lady Violet. Wherever she wished to lead him, he would go.

“Here.”

With every second that passed, Samuel felt his head growing a little clearer. He no longer felt as weak, and his vision was not as blurred. He could hear music, although where it came from, he could not say, and he was slowly beginning to make sense of his surroundings.

“You must stay silent.”

Samuel nodded, wincing as his head pained him for doing so. Lady Violet had brought them into an alcove where they could remain hidden in the dark shadows but, at the same time, be able to see the hallway from whence they had come. Lady Violet had a hold of his arm now, holding onto him tightly as though she feared he might topple over at any moment. As Samuel blinked rapidly in an attempt to regain more of his composure, he realized just how precarious a situation he was in.

“Lady Violet,” he whispered as she waved her free hand to quieten him. “The ball. You will be missed.”

She shook her head mutely, but Samuel’s worry did not dissipate. He ought not to be here alone with the lady, not when there was such a big risk to her reputation. He did not understand why he was here, did not know exactly what had occurred to place both himself and the lady in such a position, but certainly it appeared that, for the moment, he could not move.

Lady Violet’s gasp caught his attention, pushing all thought away from him. The Duke of Claverhouse’s voice was making its way along the hallway, and as Samuel watched, he saw the Duke with three ladies and one gentleman approaching the room from where they had come. The Duke was laughing loudly, with one of the ladies on his arm whilst the others followed after him. With great grandeur, he pushed the door wide open and stood aside,

expecting the others to look inside, only for one to enter and then to immediately return with a frown darkening her features.

“I knew it.”

Lady Violet’s whisper pulled him back to himself and Samuel closed his eyes, not at all certain as to what was happening or what the Duke was doing. Neither did he understand what the lady meant by such a thing. His head still ached, and he felt so much confusion that it was as though a great weight fell upon his shoulders and pressed him down in such an oppressive manner that, for a moment, Samuel struggled to breathe.

“He is coming.”

Lady Violet’s quiet whisper was urgent and terrified. Samuel opened his eyes to see the Duke of Claverhouse approaching and was caught by the expression on his face. It was not one of quiet calmness or of curiosity. Rather, there was a dark malevolence there that made Samuel suddenly afraid. The Duke had threatened that he would do something to make Samuel regret what he had said he would do as regarded Lady Violet—was this what he had meant? Had he done something that Samuel had not yet become fully aware of?

“If he finds us...” Lady Violet’s words were almost impossible to hear, but Samuel took the meaning straight away. Her reputation would be ruined, for there would be such a great scandal that only one thing would bring about even the smallest relief. It was not that Samuel would consider marriage to Lady Violet a dreadful consequence, but rather that he would not see the lady forced into matrimony in such a way. Holding his breath, Samuel pressed himself back against the alcove a little more, pulling Lady Violet close. He closed his eyes tightly as though doing such a thing would prevent the Duke from seeing them—only to hear another voice calling for the Duke.

“Your Grace, might we return to the ballroom now?”

A young lady was calling out to the Duke, and Samuel knew from experience that the gentleman would not be able to refuse.

“I should very much like to dance, and I am certain that it will be our quadrille soon.”

The Duke chuckled, but Samuel was certain that there was no real mirth in it. “But of course, Lady Julianna,” he replied, his voice sounding a good deal too close to them for Samuel’s liking. “I am sorry that what I promised you was not here.”

Samuel felt Lady Violet shudder and allowed his arms to tighten about her a little more as the Duke's footsteps began to make their way back down along the hallway. As they stood there together, Samuel allowed his breath to become a little more even as his body slowly relaxed. The danger, it seemed, was past.

"I must return to the ballroom." Lady Violet lifted her head from where it had rested on his shoulder, her breath whispering across his cheek. Samuel looked down at her, barely able to make out her profile in the shadows. It was the most ridiculous moment to think of anything other than the Duke, but the only thing that was in Samuel's mind was just how much he wanted to kiss Lady Violet. The urge was almost overpowering, and given how she lingered in his arms, Samuel was quite certain that she would respond in kind, dare he do so.

"The Duke will be expecting me."

Her next words shattered that emotion the very next moment and Samuel felt himself stiffen as Lady Violet moved back from him. "You are to dance with the Duke?"

"I must," she said softly, her hand finding his in the dark and holding onto it tightly. "He must not know that I have been here, that I was the one to..." She trailed off, her breath a little ragged as she let out a long breath. "Might you call upon me tomorrow?"

"Willingly," he replied, still trying to quell the urge to tug her back into his arms. "Lady Violet, I do not know what has happened, but I am certain that I owe you a great deal of thanks."

She released his hand and Samuel felt his heart drop like a stone.

"You must not be seen, Lord Coatbridge," she said, stepping out from the alcove. "Tomorrow. You must—" She halted. "No, my mother will be present, *and* my sister. I will not be able to speak openly." Hesitating, she turned back to him. "Perhaps you might take tea at Gunter's tomorrow?"

This made him smile. "I certainly shall, at whatever time you choose, my lady," he replied as Lady Violet nodded. She told him when they would meet and, with a promise to explain all, stepped away from him. Samuel could not help but watch her as she made her way back towards the door that led into the ballroom, finding himself overcome by at all that had taken place.

Lady Violet hesitated just as she came to the door, turning once more to throw a glance back towards him before she straightened



her shoulders and then stepped through. Letting out a long breath, Samuel closed his eyes and turned, leaning his head back against the wall of the alcove. The pain in his head was lessening all the more but, as it did so, he felt his confusion growing steadily.

*What do I last remember?*

Squeezing his eyes a little more tightly closed, Samuel tried to remember what he had done last. He had been struggling to know what to do as regarded the Duke and had, therefore, chosen to attend the ball with the sole intention of speaking to Lady Violet. Was this the ball that he had meant to attend? And if it was, why had he woken up in another room with Lady Violet's face directly in front of him?

Rubbing his forehead, Samuel opened his eyes and let out a long breath. Lady Violet had been quite clear—the Duke could not know that he was here for he might then grow suspicious of Lady Violet herself. Biting his lip, Samuel thought for a moment, and then stepped out of the alcove and made his way along the other end of the hallway, looking for another way from the house. His mind continued to turn over the many, many thoughts that were whirling through it, still struggling to make sense of all that had occurred. Just what had the Duke been trying to do and why had Lady Violet been the one to save him?



\* \* \*

Samuel did not think he had ever been happier to see another living soul than he was to see Lady Violet again. He had been in Gunter's for over an hour and had felt every single minute pass as he waited. Overnight, his thoughts had become no clearer, for much to his astonishment, his carriage had been waiting for him as he had emerged from the townhouse last night. His driver had informed him that they had taken him to the ball as he had requested and

that, therefore, his presence there was not at all surprising. However, Samuel had no knowledge of what had happened thereafter. In fact, his memory was still very hazy indeed.

“Lady Violet.”

He rose from his chair as she came towards him, her sister beside her as their maid remained outside. Her smile was warm, but her eyes filled with concern. “Lord Coatbridge,” she replied softly. “You know my sister, I think? Lady Mary?”

“But of course.” Samuel bowed low and then waited until the two ladies had taken their seats. “I am very glad to see you both.”

“It is just as well that our mother does not care for ices,” Lady Mary replied, smiling. “She was considering joining us, but when she heard that we intended to make our way to Gunter’s, she changed her mind.”

“Indeed.”

Lady Violet leaned forward in her chair. “Lord Coatbridge, I have informed my sister of what occurred last evening,” she said quietly. “There is nothing she does not know.”

“Then you know more than I, Lady Mary,” Samuel replied with a slightly wry smile. “Although, as I have said again, I am certain that I owe you a great debt of gratitude, Lady Violet.”

Samuel wished he could take Lady Violet’s hand, but given the circumstances, he could not. The table they were sitting at might be far from the entrance to Gunter’s, but he still had to be careful to behave with all propriety. The way that she was looking at him spoke volumes, for her lilac eyes were liquid pools of color, gazing into his whilst a gentle furrowing of her brow told him of her ongoing concern. Her cheeks were a dusky pink, and Samuel wondered if she was remembering just how close they had been last evening when they had been hiding from the Duke.

“You must be on your guard, Lord Coatbridge.” Lady Violet’s voice was low, as though she feared the Duke was nearby and might overhear her. “I believe now that the Duke is determined to injure you and cause whatever scandal he can, in order to have the *ton* look down on you with disdain.” Her frown grew. “Although why he would do so, I cannot imagine.”

Letting out a long breath, Samuel nodded slowly. “I am fully aware as to his reasons, Lady Violet,” he began, his shoulders slumping just a little. “You will recall that I came to speak to you about the Duke and his potential proposal?”

Her eyes flickered. "You wanted me to be cautious."

"For good reason," he said firmly, before going on to explain all that the Duke had told him. Lady Violet's face whitened just a fraction, but other than that, she did not appear to be overly perturbed. "I am certain that it was simply due to his state of inebriation that he spoke so openly," he continued, "but I confess that I am very glad indeed that it was so." He took in Lady Violet's expression, seeing that it remained mostly unchanged. "You—you were aware of the Duke's intentions?"

Lady Violet hesitated, then shook her head. "I was not aware of his full intention, no," she said softly. "However, Lady Lydia, a friend recently wed, gave warning to me about the Duke's true character." Dropping her head, Lady Violet looked away, appearing a little ashamed. "In truth, Lord Coatbridge, I found myself eager for the Duke's company. I wanted to believe that his character would not remain as it had been, that he would change somewhat and that his attentions toward me were, for the most part, entirely honorable." Looking up at him once more, she lifted her chin although there were now two dots of color in her cheeks. "I am embarrassed to confess the truth of it to you, but had I been more cautious, had I given more weight to all that Lady Lydia told me, then we might not now find ourselves in this particular situation. I am truly sorry for my own lack of wisdom."

Samuel could not help but grasp her hand for a moment, wanting to reassure and comfort her in any way he could. "My dear Lady Violet," he said, letting the words come from his heart without hesitation or restrain. "You have nothing to apologize for. After all, am I not the Duke's friend? Have I not been close to him these last few weeks and thought very well of him indeed?" He shook his head, feeling her fingers press lightly against his. "I now realize that I did not know him very well at all. It was only by chance that a small boy has informed me that the Duke has been demanding coins from the street urchins that run through London." Seeing her surprised look, he quickly explained about George and all that had been discovered. "Had I been more questioning about one or two things that came from his lips, or had I even thought to *ask* him about his standing at present, then we might well be free of this trouble." A wry smile touched his lips. "So you see, Lady Violet, you are not to blame."

Lady Violet closed her eyes for a moment. "Not solely to blame,

at least," she answered quietly, opening her eyes to look back into his face. "Lord Coatbridge, the Duke is not your friend or your ally. Last evening, he took me from the ballroom—" She stopped suddenly, seeing the shock that must have rippled across his face at such a statement. "By that," she continued quickly, "I mean to say that it was with my mother's permission. She believed that the Duke intended to propose, for he had written to seek my father's permission. Although," she added, frowning as she glanced at her sister, "he did state he would walk about the ballroom with me, only to lead me from it entirely."

Lady Mary's face was dark with anger towards the Duke of Claverhouse. "He did not behave well."

"No, he did not," Lady Violet agreed softly. "That being said, Lord Coatbridge, when he brought me to this room, when the door was pushed back, I discovered you there lying on the chaise longue. As I stared in shock, there came another to stand by you." Her face began to color with heat, and she looked away, clearly a little embarrassed. "A Mrs. Westerton?"

Samuel did not recognize the name immediately, frowning hard as he searched his mind, only to then recall precisely whom Lady Violet was speaking of. His hand pulled from hers at once as he held up both hands in a defensive manner, his jaw working hard as he tried to find the right words to defend himself.

"I swear to you, Lady Violet, I did not—"

"The more I considered the matter, the more I believed that the Duke had set up this arrangement." Lady Violet was smiling gently and had leaned forward in her chair in an obvious attempt to reassure him. "The Duke had told me only some days earlier that you were, evidently, attempting to coerce Mrs. Westerton into your care rather than remain with Lord Johnstone. I admit that I was greatly overcome with shock and surprise when I first set eyes upon the situation, but shortly upon returning to the ballroom, I began to question a good many things."

"Such as, why the Duke had mentioned that lady to you only for her then to reappear in the very same room that the Duke had intended to use for his proposal," Lady Mary stated as Samuel nodded slowly. "That is why my sister returned to you, Lord Coatbridge."

The heavy sigh that left Samuel's mouth was a genuine one. Closing his eyes, he blew out yet another long breath as he realized

the extent of what Lady Violet had saved him from. She had taken him from that room and had hidden him in the shadows just as the Duke had brought some from the *ton* in order to look upon Samuel's shame and scandal. It would have ruined him utterly.

"The Duke warned me not to speak to you, Lady Violet," he said heavily, looking at her again and seeing the sorrow in her face. "I did not expect such a devious and dark intent, however. He must have given me a glass of something to drink with another concoction within it and then set his plan in motion." Swallowing hard, he closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a long breath, steadying himself inwardly. "I am horrified."

"We are both saved," she answered softly. "Although it does not help us to know what we ought to do next. Surely there is a concern now that the Duke will continue with his intentions to ruin you and to propose to me."

Lady Mary leaned into her sister a little more. "And he may use even darker methods to make certain that you agree to his proposal, my dear sister," she said warningly. "For the only reason he took you to that room was so that you might think all the worse of Lord Coatbridge."

"Which," Lady Violet murmured, looking thoughtful, "means that the Duke believes that I now think Lord Coatbridge is the very worst sort of gentleman, even if he did not manage to have any more of the *ton* see what he had planned." Her eyes slid back to Samuel's. "We might be able to use that to our advantage."

Samuel stared at her, his heart beating a little more quickly than before. He had never expected Lady Violet to want to further her acquaintance with the Duke for the sole purpose of preventing him from achieving his ends. "My lady," he said slowly, "surely it would be best to remove yourself from the Duke entirely by some other means. There is no need to do anything more."

Lady Violet lifted her chin, and a hardness came into her eyes that Samuel had never seen before.

"The Duke will not be permitted to treat either myself or you in such a manner without consequence," she stated firmly. "After all, if a gentleman's character is to change, then the gentleman in question must be shown where he has done wrong and made to suffer the consequences of it." Lifting one eyebrow, a tiny smile pulled at her mouth, but her eyes remained cool and steady. "It is in the faint hope that he will not continue in such a manner that I

state such an intention.”

Lady Mary did not protest, and despite Samuel’s immediate urge to object and refuse what the lady said, he found himself beginning to nod.

“We do not want the Duke to behave so again, I suppose,” he said softly. “What is it, Lady Violet, that you have in mind?”

She smiled at him, her eyes sparkling now that she had his attention and agreement. “Let us come up with a plan together, Lord Coatbridge,” she replied meaningfully. “I believe I will need you by my side if we are to achieve our aims.”

“I will stand by you willingly, Lady Violet,” Samuel replied, his heart feeling more for the lady in that one moment than ever before. “Let us begin.”

# 12

“Lady Violet.”

Violet put a bright smile on her face and waited for the Duke to approach her. Inwardly, she felt nothing but a seething anger and a strong desire to throw herself at the Duke in utter fury, whilst outwardly she remained seemingly contented and happy.

“How very good to see you, Your Grace,” she said as he came to join her, Lady Mary, Miss Walters, Miss Kelling, and their respective mothers, who walked a short distance behind. “You are acquainted with us all, I believe?” She gestured to the others, who all greeted the Duke in the same affable manner as she had expressed, even though Violet knew that they were still very wary of him. Aside from Lady Mary, Violet had not told the others what had taken place, although she fully intended to do so.

“I am acquainted with you all, certainly,” the Duke replied, although Violet did not miss how his eyes skipped over Miss Walters and Miss Kelling. Evidently, they were a little too low in terms of their standing to content him. “Are you taking a walk this fine afternoon?”

She kept her smile pinned in place. “We are, Your Grace,” she answered, injecting as much hope into her voice as she could. “Might I ask if you would be willing to join us for a short time? I confess,” she added, moving a fraction closer, “that I, in particular, would be glad of your company.” Looking up into his handsome face in what she hoped was an eager manner, she saw the flash of understanding in his eyes and, after a moment, he nodded.

“But of course, Lady Violet,” he said grandly, offering her his arm with a flourish. “There are many things we must discuss, I am sure.”

Violet threw a look to her sister, who nodded discreetly before making certain to fall into step behind Violet, with her cousin and Miss Kelling doing the same. It would appear quite natural to any other member of the *ton* who walked with them, Violet considered, for the Duke had made it quite plain that she was his chosen favorite.

"We have not spoken since the ball some two nights ago, Lady Violet," the Duke murmured quietly. "I did think about calling, but I feared you might not be pleased to see me."

"How could you think such a thing?" Violet asked, feigning shock. "I was horrified at what I witnessed, certainly, but that does not set any blame upon your shoulders!"

The Duke chuckled softly, although Violet did not much like the sound. "No, indeed not," he agreed quietly. "There is no blame that could be set upon either one of our shoulders, Lady Violet." He reached across with his free hand and patted her other one. "You especially. I cannot imagine the shock you must feel at having seen such a thing."

"I was rather shaken, as you know," she told him. "I am certain that our dances were a little lackluster on my part, for which I am extremely sorry."

"Not in the least," the Duke replied firmly. "You did very well, Lady Violet. I am only sorry that the evening was spoiled by such a thing, for I did have particular intentions that were completely ruined by Lord Coatbridge's presence."

A twist in Violet's stomach set her on edge but she forced herself to remain outwardly at ease. "Oh?"

"Indeed, Lady Violet," the Duke murmured, sounding a good deal more tender than ever before. "I am certain that you have been informed of my letter to your father, even if you claim that you have no knowledge of it." He chuckled and patted her hand again. "However, I will not be thwarted! I must have your particular attention at some point soon, Lady Violet. I have something that I *must* ask you." Twisting his head around, he looked back at the other ladies now walking with them. "Indeed, I would ask you here at this very moment if I thought it was the right time."

"Oh, pray do not," Violet said, her heart suddenly leaping up into her throat. "I should not like you to be so foiled in your intentions, Your Grace." Her eyes brightened and she looked up at him with hopeful expectation, silently praying that he would take on her suggestion without delay. "After all, you had intentions of speaking to me at the last ball we attended, had you not?" she asked. "Is there not another ball taking place very soon?"

The Duke hesitated, his brows furrowing for just a moment, before they lifted up high as his face split with a smile.

"You are speaking of Lord and Lady Huddersfield's ball, are you



not?" he asked as she laughed softly. "Yes, Lady Violet, I am in attendance tomorrow evening at their ball. I presume you will be also?"

She nodded, allowing her gaze to drop away in what she prayed appeared to the Duke to be a coy manner. "I will be, Your Grace."

He chuckled, leaning a little closer to her as they walked, his voice dropping low. "Then I shall make certain to find you there," he said, sending a shiver down her spine—although it was not one of pleasure. "And then, finally, I shall be able to speak to you as I have long wished."

"I look forward to it with great expectation and hope, Your Grace," she told him, lifting her chin and looking directly into his eyes. She was, at last, speaking the honest truth to him and it felt very refreshing. "We will be able to speak with great openness and honesty, will we not? Unhindered by others nearby?"

The Duke's eyes glittered, and Violet smiled inwardly. The Duke clearly thought that her suggestions came from a desire to be physically close to him, away from the views of others, and, as both Lord Coatbridge and she herself had expected, he agreed to it at once.

"Certainly, Lady Violet," he murmured as his name was called by yet another acquaintance who now appeared to be approaching them. "I will make sure that we have a very...*private* space for our conversation."

"Allow me to do so," she said as his acquaintance drew near. "I am friends with Lady Huddersfield, and I am certain she will understand."

The Duke's eyebrows rose in surprise, but he did not have time to argue, for his friend drew near and they were immediately drawn into conversation with him. Violet stood quietly and spoke only a little but inwardly felt a great sense of triumph growing within her heart. Thus far, the plan was going just as she had hoped it might and she could only pray that Lord Coatbridge was having just as much success in his particular endeavors.

*Lord Coatbridge.*

The gentleman had captured so much of her heart that Violet could not think of him without happiness filling her soul. The great sense of shock and horror that had flooded her when she had first seen him lying on the chaise lounge had quickly dissipated into a great swell of relief when she had realized the truth. Nor could she

forget just how much she had felt when they had been closeted together in the alcove.

Yes, there had been a great sense of anxiety that the Duke of Claverhouse would draw near to them and discover them hiding there together, but once that particular worry had faded, she had found herself in Lord Coatbridge's arms with no desire to step away from him. In fact, she had wanted to linger there despite the impropriety of it all. More than that, she had wanted him to lower his head and kiss her, to reassure her that all was well and to admit to both himself and to her all that was growing between them. After all, Violet had realized, she would not have felt so much distress over Lord Coatbridge's apparent fall from grace if she did not have a great and growing affection for him within her heart.

"Violet?"

She glanced across at her sister, who was now standing beside her as the Duke and his friend continued their conversation. "Yes?"

"Is all going well?"

Violet allowed herself a small, exultant smile. "Yes, my dear sister," she replied quietly. "It is all going very well indeed."



\* \* \*

"Lord Coatbridge."

Violet had seen him out of the corner of her eye as she had entered the ballroom, and a flush of heat had seared her from head to foot. His eyes had been fixed to her, making her all too aware of his presence, and she had felt herself grow almost giddy with anticipation of what was to come. However, he had remained absent from her side, had not come to speak to her or walk past her, but had instead remained absent, hiding himself away until the right time.

The Duke of Claverhouse was now dancing the first cotillion of

the evening and, thus, Lord Coatbridge had appeared.

“Good evening, Lady Violet, Lady Mary,” he murmured as they both greeted him with a quick curtsy. His eyes searched her face. “Have you had success, Lady Violet?”

She nodded. “I have.” Wanting to reach out, she hesitated for a moment before lightly touching his arm, just needing to have a small connection with him for a short while. “And you?”

“I have had success also,” he said quietly. “She is waiting to be informed as to where to go.”

Violet swallowed hard. She had not been lying when she had told the Duke that Lady Huddersfield had been a friend. However, when Violet had asked for a small parlor that she might make use of if it was required, it was not for the reason that Lady Huddersfield believed. Violet had made some dreadful excuse of requiring it for a short rest given that she had been suffering from a painful headache recently, but Lady Huddersfield had been more than obliging.

“The parlor is open for my particular use,” Lady Violet said softly, giving him the particulars of where it was. “I am sure that the Duke and I will be present there very soon.” She glanced down at her dance card. “Our next dance is in a very short while.”

Lord Coatbridge’s hand settled over hers for a moment. “It will all go well, Lady Violet,” he said encouragingly. “We will return here with everything settled; I am certain of it.”

The comfort that came with his hand on hers was like a great flood that poured out over a hot fire. Violet felt her chest loosen, her breathing settle, and her shoulders drop. A smile came to her lips as she looked up into his face, seeing the promise that was held in his eyes. “I am sure we shall, Lord Coatbridge,” she replied as he dropped his hand. “And all will be well.”



"Instead of our dance, Lady Violet, I wondered whether we might take a short turn about the room."

Violet, who had been expecting as much from the Duke, still found herself rather tense as she looked into his eyes and saw the slight gleam that was held there. "Yes, of course, Your Grace," she replied, glancing over at her mother and seeing how Lady Arrington nodded approvingly. "I should be glad to."

They would miss the waltz, but given the importance of such a dance, most of the *ton* were either dancing or taking a good deal of note as to which of the young ladies and gentlemen were out dancing together. Taking his proffered arm, she stepped away from her mother and sister, fully aware of the concerned look that Lady Mary sent in her direction. Violet steeled herself inwardly, lifting her chin and forcing her courage to the fore. Lord Coatbridge would be waiting for her, and this matter would come to a close. She had to believe that it would all go as they had planned.

"Did you manage to secure a small place for us, Lady Violet?" the Duke asked, and she nodded. "You know Lady Huddersfield well, then?"

"A little," she replied honestly. "There is a parlor that I have been offered for my own particular use, although," she continued, with a small, somewhat wry smile, "the lady does not know the true reason for my request."

This made the Duke chuckle, and Violet made certain to keep her smile in place so that he would continue to feel more than comfortable in her presence. "We shall be very cautious, you and I," he told her as they came to the door that would lead them out into the hallway. "For whilst I am more than eager to speak to you in private, Lady Violet, I must also do whatever I can to protect your reputation."

"For which I am very grateful, Your Grace," she replied as the door was held open for them. Thankfully, there were one or two others who also were exiting at the very same time, and they did not garner a great deal of notice. "It is just to your right, Your Grace. The door, she said, would be ajar."

The Duke was so pompous a gentleman that he immediately pressed forward, pushing the door open and stepping inside without so much as a momentary hesitation. This worked in Violet's favor, for she was then able to step into the room and close door behind her, leaning against it as though she wanted to make quite certain it

was shut tight.

It took a few seconds for the Duke to realize that the room was not as he had expected it. It was not entirely vacant. Mrs. Westerton was sitting down on a chair next to the fire, her eyes wide as she rose to her feet. Violet said nothing, choosing to remain silent as the Duke took a few steps forward, his eyes fixing on the lady.

“Whatever are you doing here, Mrs. Westerton?” he said as the lady dropped her head, her gaze to the floor. “We have already done all that...” He trailed off, throwing a glance behind his shoulder towards Violet and clearing his throat abruptly. “Lady Violet, do excuse me. I did not think that we would have company. Clearly Mrs. Westerton is in the wrong room.”

“You are well acquainted with the lady, then?” Violet asked, keeping her voice steady and calm. She took a few steps closer to the Duke, seeing him step sideways, looking from Mrs. Westerton to herself and back again. “This is the very lady that we saw with Lord Coatbridge, is it not?”

The Duke opened his mouth to say something, only for his eyes to widen slightly and his lips to pull into a wide grin. “Exactly,” he said, as though he had only just thought of such an idea. “No doubt you are waiting for Lord Coatbridge, are you not?” He turned back to Mrs. Westerton, his arms spread wide. “I would have thought that the gentleman would not dare risk being seen in your company yet again, but it seems that I am mistaken.”

Violet lifted her chin and cleared her throat. “I hardly think that Lord Coatbridge would be so bold, Your Grace,” she said clearly, seeing him look at her with a flicker of doubt in his eyes. “For the whole affair had been construed by yourself in order to make certain that Lord Coatbridge did not speak to me of your true intentions.”

As she spoke, Violet saw the Duke’s eyes widen slightly and the confident air that surrounded him slowly began to evaporate.

“You have no intention of providing me with any sort of happiness once we are wed, Your Grace,” she continued, growing in confidence with every word she spoke. “You intend to use me to produce the required children but would leave me to myself for the remainder of my life.” Throwing up her hands, she took a few steps closer to the Duke. “Besides which, you do not care for me at all. There is not even the smallest amount of affection in your heart for me. All you desire is the dowry that my father intends to bestow

and, thereafter, whatever wealth he wishes to place upon me. Is that not so, Your Grace?"

The Duke had gone very still. His eyes had narrowed and there was ice in his gaze. His lip curled as he neared her, making Violet realize just how malevolent he could be.

"Lord Coatbridge is filling your head with nonsense," he spat as Mrs. Westerton slowly sank back down into a chair, clearly a little perturbed. "You are speaking nothing but foolishness, Lady Violet. I came here on *your* request, so that I might propose. And now, it seems—"

"Your proposal will be refused."

Out of the corner of the room, a deep voice spoke. It did not frighten Violet in any way but, instead, gave her such a sensation of relief that she could barely catch her breath for a few moments. The Duke himself swung around whilst Mrs. Westerton was the only one who remained calm.

"I have spoken to Mrs. Westerton," Lord Coatbridge stated, gesturing to the lady as he came out of the dark shadows in the corner of the room that had hidden him so well. "She has informed me that not only was she to put a substance into whatever glass I held, she was also then to remain in a particular room with me whilst she awaited your arrival." His face was as dark as his voice, the flames from the fire in the grate lighting only a little of his features. "It seems that you are very good at threatening people, *Your Grace*."

Before she knew what was happening, Violet found herself walking across the room directly in front of the Duke before coming to stand right beside Lord Coatbridge. His brows were low over his eyes and his expression very grim, but there was a warmth still in his glance as he looked at her. His hand brushed hers momentarily and filled Violet with such a sense of relief that it was all she could do not to fall directly into his arms.

"I see what you are doing," the Duke replied, speaking with great slowness as he turned around to look at Violet and Lord Coatbridge more directly. "You are filling Lady Violet's head with lies so that you might steal her for yourself, Coatbridge."

Lord Coatbridge lifted his chin a notch. "I will not pretend nor lie," he said, reaching out to slip one hand around Violet's waist for a moment. "I do care for Lady Violet. To pretend I do not would be entirely foolish and I will admit that the urge I had to protect her

from your malicious intentions came from that affection. However, I would have done the same for any young lady, Claverhouse.” He shook his head. “You cannot treat people so ill. It is not fair to them, nor is it right.”

A hard, cruel laugh came from the Duke, and Violet shivered, her skin prickling. It felt as though the Duke was, for the very first time, showing his true nature, and it was one she did not like.

“Lady Violet, you cannot believe that—”

“Lady Lydia spoke to me of you, Your Grace,” she interrupted, speaking a little more loudly than she had intended. “I wanted to believe that there was a capacity for your character to change, but it soon became clear that such a belief was nothing but foolishness.” Lord Coatbridge’s hand slipped from her waist as she stepped forward, wanting to prove to the Duke that she was not at all afraid of him. “I believe everything Lord Coatbridge says, and what is more, I find that my heart is much more inclined towards him than it would have ever been to you.”

This seemed to take the Duke by surprise, for he stared at her for a few seconds without much understanding, as though to comprehend all that she was saying was much too complicated.

“I—I have done as you asked, Lord Coatbridge,” Mrs. Westerton spoke up and interrupted their conversation, her hands clenched in front of her and her teeth worrying her lip as she glanced from him to the Duke and back again. “Pray, might I depart?”

Lord Coatbridge smiled gently. “You need not beg my permission, Mrs. Westerton,” he replied softly. “Yes, leave whenever you wish it. Please, tell me what the Duke did?” His gaze hardened and he turned back to the Duke as Mrs. Westerton, after only a few minutes’ persuasion, turned back to the Duke.

Violet listened for what was the first time as Mrs. Westerton told Lord Coatbridge how the Duke had forced her to lace his glass of brandy with some unknown concoction and then to lead Lord Coatbridge to a small room where he had lain down and fallen into unconsciousness.

“And if I did not,” the poor lady finished, a tremor in her voice, “then he would make certain that my protection with Lord Johnstone was ended without delay. The Duke has a lot of influence amongst the *ton*, so I could only believe what he told me. And then what would I have done?”

Violet shook her head to herself, realizing just how cruel the

Duke of Claverhouse was. It was not that she approved of Mrs. Westerton being mistress to Lord Johnstone but rather that such ladies often required the protection of a gentleman simply in order to survive. To have such a threat placed on her by the hand of a Duke must have been very frightening.

"You did not wish for me to know the truth, Your Grace," she murmured as Mrs. Westerton quit the room, closing the door behind her. "Lord Coatbridge wanted to protect me from you and, knowing that he intended to do so, you attempted to ruin him both in my eyes and in the eyes of society so that I would neither listen nor believe a word that he spoke." She held the Duke's gaze steadily, finding no fear within herself of his visibly growing anger. "I have heard that you have been involved in an attempt to steal money from the *ton* by way of small, helpless children and a man named Franks." Seeing the Duke's eyes flicker, she shook her head. "You will not deny it, and thus, I know it is the truth. You wanted only my dowry and, thereafter, any wealth you could pull from my father simply to help your own difficult and self-imposed position. I ought never to have hoped that you might change, ought never to have flattered myself that your interest in me might be genuine." She shook her head, angry at her own foolishness. "I am taken in no longer."

"And you will not be permitted to do so again, Claverhouse." Lord Coatbridge's voice held an edge of steel that told Violet he would brook neither argument nor threat from the Duke thereafter. "This is at an end. All that you have done with Franks is to be brought to a close. I will see to that myself." He cut through the air with his hand. "There is no friendship between us any longer, for that is severed entirely. And there is no connection between yourself and the lady. It is all done."

The Duke's lip curled. "And if I do not acquiesce?" he asked, his voice low and grating. "Then what shall you do?" His head lifted, the cruel gleam coming back into his eyes. "There is naught you *can* do, Coatbridge. In fact," he continued, his voice growing louder with every thought, "it is *I* who can injure you. I shall ruin you both and—"

The door behind them was suddenly pushed open and Violet turned at once, her heart slamming hard against her chest as she realized they had been discovered. A lady she did not recognize had entered into the room, seemingly by accident. She stopped dead,



her eyes wide and her mouth forming a perfect circle as she took in the scene before her.

“Lady Brigstock.” Lord Coatbridge cleared his throat and came to stand by Violet, bowing low as he did so. “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Lord Coatbridge,” came the reply, with the lady casting a sharp eye over them all before one eyebrow arched and her smile grew. “Just what have I come across here?”

Violet shared a quick look with Lord Coatbridge, feeling as though a hand had grasped her heart and was now squeezing it painfully. She had been discovered. She was in a room alone with two gentlemen and no chaperone. Whoever this lady was, Violet had no doubt that she would soon spread through all of society exactly what she had seen, for the gleam in Lady Brigstock’s eye told her that the lady was almost gleeful over this particular circumstance.

Lord Coatbridge cleared his throat, throwing one look over his shoulder towards the Duke. Violet did so also, realizing to her horror that this was a situation that the Duke could well use to his advantage. He might say all manner of things about her, to the point that even an engagement could never remove scandal from her.

She might be ruined, her sister and cousin might be ruined, and even her mother and father could suffer because of this. Wide eyed, she stared fixedly at Lord Coatbridge for some moments as he cleared his throat gruffly once more, before casting a hasty glance towards the Duke himself. A small, sly grin was beginning to spread across his face, betraying the fact that he, too, had realized the opportunity this circumstance now presented.

Violet drew in a deep breath, her stomach churning furiously as she realized that she had no other choice but to act. Lifting her chin, she threw one more glance towards the Duke but this time, it was not one of fear but rather of triumph.

“Lady Brigstock,” she said, stepping forward before the Duke could say a single word. “I confess that I am not acquainted with you, but please, share in my joy.”

Lady Brigstock’s eyes rounded as Violet took a step closer to Lord Coatbridge, praying desperately that he would not despise her for the action she was about to take. “Oh?”

“The Duke was kind enough to bring me to where Lord Coatbridge was waiting, knowing that he intended to propose,”

Violet said, slipping one hand through Lord Coatbridge's arm and instantly feeling him tense. "You have joined us just moments after I have accepted Lord Coatbridge's proposal of marriage." Putting on the widest smile she could manage, she turned to Lord Coatbridge, who had gone very still. "I am certain that we shall be very happy."

Lord Coatbridge said nothing for a few moments, and it was not until Lady Brigstock turned to him with a questioning look that he managed to respond. Giving himself a slight shake, he began to smile and reached across to pat Violet's hand.

"Lady Brigstock, might I beg of you to keep this to yourself for only a few hours more?" he asked, sounding more delighted than Violet had expected. "We have not yet told Lord and Lady Arrington, but come the morning, you may tell as many people as you choose."

"I know that my father, in particular, would be very glad of your discretion," Violet added as the lady began to nod slowly, although there was still a very bright smile on her face and a gleam in her eye. "We should like very much to celebrate together over this news before all of society knows of it."

She held her breath, praying desperately that Lady Brigstock would do as both she and Lord Coatbridge had asked, but she did not need to pray for long. With an excited squeal, the lady threw herself forward and grasped Lord Coatbridge's upper arms, exclaiming wildly about just how wonderful such news was and how she would be very glad indeed to speak nothing of it until the morning. Such was Violet's relief that, for a moment, she forgot that the Duke himself was present. But, as Lady Brigstock continued to exclaim loudly over this new engagement, Violet allowed herself one look over her shoulder.

The Duke of Claverhouse was a picture of defeat. He was leaning back against the wall, his arms folded across his chest, his shoulders slumped and his head dropping forward. His eyes were hooded, but there was no victory in them now. There was no longer a calculating gleam hidden within them, no curl of his lip or any expectation of success. His intentions for both her and Lord Coatbridge had come to naught, and Violet could not help but feel both relief and gladness that it was so.

"I shall not tell a soul until the morrow; you have my word."

Lady Brigstock let out another excited squeal, grasped Violet's hand, and squeezed it tightly. "Please accept my congratulations,

Lady Violet!" she cried as Violet tried her best to smile with the delight of someone who had only just been granted their heart's desire. "I am truly glad for the both of you."

"And I should return you to your mother, Lady Violet," Lord Coatbridge said grandly, turning back towards Violet and away from Lady Brigstock. "Now that we are settled, might I ask, Lady Brigstock, if you would accompany both myself and Lady Violet back to the ballroom? The Duke, as you can see, is a little melancholy this evening."

Lady Brigstock started visibly as she peered over Violet's shoulder, as if she had forgotten the Duke's presence. "Oh, Your Grace," she began, only for the Duke to push himself away from the wall and storm from the room, allowing the door to slam back against the wall as he threw it open. Lady Brigstock blinked in surprise, but Lord Coatbridge merely laughed, drawing her attention once more.

"I think the Duke is a little upset that he cannot be the one to tell the *ton* of our engagement, Lady Brigstock," he said quickly, making the lady's features flood with relief. "But I am certain he will understand. Come now." With a broad smile still on his face, he reached for Violet's hand and pulled it gently under his arm. "Let us return to the ballroom."

# 13

*You have joined us just moments after I have accepted Lord Coatbridge's proposal of marriage.*

Those words had jolted Samuel's very soul. Even now, as he walked back into the ballroom with Lady Violet by his side and Lady Brigstock on the other, Samuel was still filled by such a great sense of shock that he felt as though he were merely playacting a particular role. And yet, as he looked across to where Lady Violet was and felt her hand on his arm, he knew that he was not mistaken.

*I am engaged.*

It was not a displeasing thought, however. There was a delight in knowing that he was now engaged to the lovely Lady Violet and, even more so, in feeling the relief and pleasure that came from being quite certain of her safety. The Duke of Claverhouse could do no more, he was sure of it, and yet Samuel feared that the Duke might yet find another way to injure him. After all, the man was not one used to being denied what he desired.

"I shall leave you now," Lady Brigstock said, drawing Samuel back to his present situation. "Lord Coatbridge, Lady Violet." She smiled at them both with such warmth and such an excitement lingering in her eyes that Samuel feared she would not be able to keep such news to herself until the morning. Lady Brigstock was one of the most notorious gossips in all of London, and for her to have stumbled upon them had been most unfortunate.

"Lady Brigstock." Samuel dipped his head. "I thank you."

"As do I," he heard Lady Violet say softly, before the first lady finally turned away. Lady Arrington was standing nearby but Samuel did not yet look at her. Instead, he continued to study his bride-to-be, seeing how she did not meet his gaze and how a flush of deep pink was beginning to settle into her cheeks.

Lady Violet had been the one to speak to Lady Brigstock, to come up with the plan that would not only remove all trace of scandal from them both but would, at the same time, bind them together forever. There was no possibility of them ending this new

engagement, for that would cause an even greater disgrace. Besides which, Samuel found that he had no desire to do such a thing. Looking into her face and almost desperate for her to return his gaze, Samuel remained quite silent, taking in this new state of being as best he could.

The music seemed a little sweeter, the laughter that surrounded them a trifle more melodious. The candle light was brighter than before, the delicate beauty of Lady Violet all the more apparent. He was engaged to the lady beside him, and in this single moment, Samuel felt a match strike and light a new flame of happiness.

“Ah, Violet,” Lady Arrington had noticed them at last and came forward at once, looking at Samuel with a curious interest in her expression. “Oh, and Lord Coatbridge. I must apologize, I thought my daughter was with the Duke of Claverhouse.”

“I—I was, Mama,” Lady Violet said quickly, stammering just a little as she tried to quickly come up with a reason as to why she was now with Samuel rather than the Duke of Claverhouse. “I was taking a turn about the room with the Duke and he, unfortunately, was then called to the next dance.” She smiled up at Samuel, although he could still see the uncertainty in her gaze. “Lord Coatbridge was good enough to accompany me back to you.”

Lady Arrington’s expression fell, and much to Samuel’s confusion, she appeared rather upset.

“Then, nothing significant has taken place?” she asked, speaking out of the corner of her mouth as if to make it plain that she did not want Samuel to overhear her. “You have no news?”

Samuel shot a quick glance towards Lady Violet and saw her flush.

“Not as you expect, Mama,” she said softly. “I will speak to you of it all very soon, however.”

Lady Arrington sighed and shook her head, clearly having anticipated that her daughter would have returned with some wonderfully unexpected news. *No doubt Lady Arrington expected Lady Violet to now be engaged to the Duke of Claverhouse*, Samuel thought to himself, catching Lady Violet’s eye for a moment. *How disappointed she will be when she discovers that there is now only an engagement to a marquess.*

“I must take my leave.” He cleared his throat and bowed to Lady Arrington, who, still seemingly quite distracted by the lack of engagement between Lady Violet and the Duke, only gave him a

cursory nod. "Good evening, Lady Arrington." He turned to Lady Violet and took her hand in his, pressing it gently. "Good evening, Lady Violet." Raising her hand to his lips, he kissed it lightly and then released it, hoping that she received some comfort and reassurance from his gesture. There was so much for them to say, so much for them to express and to discuss, and yet there was no time for them to do so.

"Good evening, Lord Coatbridge." Lady Violet's voice was very soft, and as he released her hand and looked back at her, he saw the color once more rising in her cheeks. "Do you intend to stay long at the ball, might I ask? Or have you thought about making your way to the card room?" One eyebrow lifted, and Samuel hid a smile, realizing at once what she was doing. It seemed that her father, Lord Arrington, would be in the card room this evening, and given that Samuel had to speak to him about his engagement to Lady Violet, he would make certain to go there at once.

"The card room, I think," he replied, seeing her small smile. "And I might very well call upon you tomorrow, Lady Violet. If that is not too bold?"

She laughed then, making her mother's eyebrows lift in surprise, whilst Samuel could not help but grin.

"Given my boldness, Lord Coatbridge, I fear there is nothing that you can do or say that would be in any way similar," she replied as Samuel chuckled. "Yes, I shall look forward to your visit tomorrow."

"Good evening," he replied, bowing once more and finding that he did not wish to depart from her, even though he knew he had to do so. "I shall make certain to call as early as I can, Lady Violet."

He had to step away then, hearing Lady Arrington immediately begin to question her daughter as to what some of her remarks had meant. Samuel allowed his smile to remain although it began to become somewhat rueful as he prayed that Lady Violet would be able to satisfy her mother's concerns easily enough. He was certain that Lady Arrington would be disappointed—perhaps even grieved—to learn that Lady Violet had engaged herself to Lord Coatbridge when she might have been wed to a duke, but that, Samuel supposed, he could forgive. After all, Lady Arrington did not know the truth of the Duke's character and thus, would think only that the Duke of Claverhouse would be a more than suitable match for her daughter.

Making his way back along the hallway towards the card room, Samuel saw a footman nearby.

“Is Lord Arrington in the card room?” he asked as the footman inclined his head and placed both hands behind his back, ready to take orders. “I wish very much to speak to him.”

“Lord Arrington, my lord?” the footman replied, and Samuel nodded. “I cannot be certain, my lord, but if you would like, I can go inside and make certain one way or the other.”

Samuel hesitated, wondering if he ought to simply make his way into the card room and speak to Lord Arrington directly, only to shake his head to himself. It would not be wise to tell the man of something so important in the middle of a room filled with other gentlemen of the *ton*. It would be best to speak to Lady Violet’s father in a quieter, more discreet place so that any reaction that was given would not be noted by others. For all Samuel knew, the man would be angry that Lady Violet had chosen Samuel over the Duke. He might very well be upset that Samuel had not sought his permission first before he had proposed, even though Samuel had never spoken one word of a proposal to the lady.

“My lord?”

Seeing the confusion on the footman’s face, Samuel waved a hand. “Might you go in to see if you can fetch him, if indeed he is within the card room?” he asked, hoping that he would not make a poor impression on Lord Arrington by asking him to step out of whatever game he was playing at the time. “You may tell him that Lord Coatbridge is seeking a quiet audience with him.”

The footman nodded and walked into the room, leaving Samuel to stand quietly alone. He turned around and began to walk back along the hallway, intending to pace up and down it so that he might give some relief to his overwhelming thoughts.

He had not gone more than a few paces when he was suddenly struck by something hard crashing into the side of his head. Stunned, he staggered to one side, his vision blurring as he sought to right himself. With one hand outstretched against the wall for support, he let out a loud groan only for another crashing blow to strike at him, hard. Another came to his stomach, and Samuel could not even cry out, such was the way that the air was pushed out from him.

“You have not succeeded.”

The Duke of Claverhouse’s voice was in his ear in a moment, one

hand grasping Samuel's collar.

"I will do whatever I must in order to ruin you," he continued, hissing into Samuel's face and dragging him up to standing as Samuel tried his best to recover from the two blows that had struck him. "You have not succeeded, Coatbridge."

"You do not deserve the lady." Samuel began to push back hard against the Duke and, recovering, managed to throw him back so that the Duke's grip was released from his collar. Stumbling back, he hit the wall once more but used it to help him stand without difficulty. There was still a ringing in his ears and pain was spreading through his skull, but he was determined that the Duke should not challenge him without restraint. "I am glad to have protected her from you, regardless of the consequences."

The Duke laughed, his eyes now nothing but narrow slits and the sound emanating from his lips nothing but cruelty and selfishness. "You think that you care for her?" he spat, as though anything Samuel felt was worthy of being mocked. "That she might care for you?" He laughed again. "That means nothing. I *will* have Lady Violet's dowry for my own. I need it. I need *every single coin* that I can find." His laugh was cruel. "The street urchins bring me some but very little, therefore I *must* have it and you will not stand in my way." He raised his fist, ready to once more slam it hard into Samuel's face, only for another voice to break into the fray.

"I beg your pardon?"

Samuel, who had been about to react defensively, dropped both his hands and turned, seeing none other than Lord Arrington standing there. His eyes were fixed to the Duke, his lips pulled thin and a dark anger beginning to seep into his face.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Samuel leaned his head back against the wall and swallowed hard, realizing that, in attempting to gain what he thought he needed, the Duke had only succeeded in pushing it away from himself for good. Lord Arrington had overheard what had been shouted into Samuel's face and thus, Samuel was quite certain that Lady Violet would never belong to the Duke.

"Lord Arrington."

The Duke's voice was humble now, all trace of malice and anger gone from it.

"Lord Arrington, this gentleman—" he thrust one finger out at Samuel. "This gentleman has come to you to declare his



engagement to Lady Violet whilst I, I, who am a duke, have not been permitted the opportunity to do so at the first. How can he declare himself engaged when the lady has not yet received an offer of marriage from me?"

Lord Arrington said nothing but continued to stare hard at the Duke, his brows low over his eyes and his arms folded across his chest. It was clear that he had no intention of allowing the Duke's quiet pleading to make any difference to what he now thought of the fellow. The truth had been spoken by the Duke's own lips and could not be taken back.

"Lord Arrington, what the Duke is stating is true," Samuel responded, when the man continued to remain silent. "I have come to beg your forgiveness for not coming to seek out your permission first. Believe me, I would have done so had the situation permitted it, but there were only a few moments in which to make such a decision and when it came to it, I could not wait another second. Therefore," he continued, taking a few steps closer and spreading his hands, "you find me now come to you with the request to marry your daughter out of the great affection and respect I have for her. I do not seek to wed her because of her dowry or because of whatever wealth or fortune she might bring into the marriage." He shot a sharp, cold look towards the Duke. "I wish to marry Lady Violet because I have come to care for her deeply and can think of no other lady whom I would seek out as my bride."

This last sentence, he realized, was nothing but the truth. He had come to care for Lady Violet and his affection for her was growing steadily. There was a great pleasure now to be in her company, and now that it seemed that the threat of the Duke was gone from them both, there was a growing sense of freedom within Samuel's heart.

"Your Grace." Lord Arrington stepped closer, dropping his hands to his sides. "Anything you might say will only be tainted by the words I heard coming from your very own lips only a few moments ago. Please!" He held up one hand, stemming the excuses that immediately began to flow from the Duke of Claverhouse's lips. "I need not hear any of them, for it is all quite plain to me."

Samuel watched as the Duke dropped his head, his shoulders slumping in defeat. There was not to be a satisfactory outcome for the Duke, it seemed. Samuel's spirits lifted somewhat as he turned back to look at Lord Arrington, seeing the way that the older

gentleman surveyed him. It was as if he wanted to make certain that all that Samuel had said was true and, thus, Samuel held the man's gaze steadily. He did not say a word but rather waited for Lord Arrington to speak, not wanting to pre-empt him in any way.

"You say my daughter cares for you, Lord Coatbridge."

Samuel shook his head. "I have stated that I care for her, Lord Arrington," he said honestly. "I am not certain of her feelings, but she has accepted me." He watched as Lord Arrington's brows rose. "As I have said, it was not gone about the right way, but given the situation, I felt I had no other choice. I could not wait to seek you out and beg your permission, even though I know that was precisely what I ought to have done."

"Yes," Lord Arrington agreed firmly. "It was what ought to be done, although I can well understand the rush of feeling that takes a hold of one's heart when such things like matrimony are set out before them." His brows lifted gently, and a hint of a smile caught his lips, allowing Samuel to feel the smallest wave of relief. "If she has accepted you as you state, then there is nothing that would prevent me from being glad of the match, Lord Coatbridge." His brow furrowed again as he glared at the Duke of Claverhouse. "Whereas you, Your Grace, can consider the permission I granted you now to be retracted utterly." He threw up his hands. "In fact, you are to stay far from my daughters, Your Grace. Do you understand me? I am not about to have my other daughter treated in such a cold, contemptuous fashion."

There came no response from the Duke. Rather, he simply turned on his heel and stalked away, showing no outward signs of defeat, but Samuel knew that there could be nothing for him now except frustration and anger. Whilst he was now looking to a future where he had nothing but the expectation of hope and affection—perhaps even love.

"It seems that the Duke understands my position," Lord Arrington murmured, a light coming into his eyes. "Now, Lord Coatbridge, you say you are committed to my daughter?"

He nodded. "I am."

"Then permit me to accompany you to her," came the reply as the older gentleman began to make his way forward. "I would have my daughter know that all is well and that the match is pleasing to me. And no doubt, I will have to reassure my wife that all is not lost, simply because the Duke is not to wed Violet." A quiet chuckle

came from the corner of his mouth and Samuel allowed himself a smile, feeling a great weight roll from his shoulders.

This whole matter was at an end. There was nothing more the Duke could do. Samuel was to wed Lady Violet and the Duke would return to his own difficulties and problems without any fixed way to remove them from himself. Samuel felt no pity, however. The Duke of Claverhouse had brought such things to the fore and had to find his own way to extricate himself fully. As for himself, Samuel fully intended to enjoy the rest of the Season, knowing that his marriage to Lady Violet would soon take place and that, he was certain, would make him very happy indeed.

# Epilogue

*I am engaged.*

Violet woke up with that thought, her eyes opening slowly as her heart softened with a gentle happiness that seemed to fill her from the tip of her toes to the top of her head. With a deep breath, she settled back against the pillows and closed her eyes once more.

*He will be here soon.*

With that thought, Violet's eyes flew open once more and she flung back the bedsheets and swung her legs over the side of the bed. She could not help but feel a little trepidation at Lord Coatbridge's arrival. After all, they had not had an opportunity to speak together alone at all and thus, she was not at all certain that he felt as much delight as she did about their engagement. It had been the only thing she had felt able to do and, given that the *ton* would now all be fully aware of their engagement—for she was certain that Lady Brigstock would not have rested even a moment before beginning to spread the news—there was now nothing that could be done. Not that she wished to separate herself from Lord Coatbridge, however, for she herself felt a good deal of happiness at her engagement. She could only hope that Lord Coatbridge felt even a modicum of all that now filled her.

Ringling the bell, Violet washed her face and hands and then gazed at herself in the looking glass. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes bright, and there was a smile that pushed up the corners of her mouth. Regardless of how anxious she felt at their present circumstance, she could not pretend she was not pleased at how it had all come about. The Duke of Claverhouse was gone from them and they would not have to worry about his presence any longer.

"I must speak to Mary, Sarah, and Miss Kelling," she murmured aloud, just as the maid came in to prepare Violet for the day. "They must know it all." Yes, there had been a pact between them not to speak of the Duke, not to mention his name for fear of breaking apart their friendship, but Violet considered that her insisting upon doing so was important enough to cut through such a pact.

Yes, Lady Lydia had told them about the Duke's unfavorable

character, but she had not gone into particular detail. Violet intended to tell them everything, about all that had occurred and about everything the Duke had done. She had to protect them from his devious ways and would warn them not to be as foolish as she. How ridiculous she had been to allow such flattery to overwhelm her. How stupid to fall for the Duke's attentions without allowing Lady Lydia's words to take full hold.

Violet had to admit to herself that she was more grateful to Lord Coatbridge than she could express for doing all he could to save her from the Duke's proposal and his nefarious intentions for her thereafter. To have found such happiness in spite of the near disaster that had fallen on her was a blessing and that, Violet knew, was the reason she could not seem to stop her smile.

"Good morning, Mama."

Violet smiled warmly at her mother as she came into the drawing room. She had broken her fast and made certain she was ready for Lord Coatbridge's arrival before walking into the drawing room, ready now only to sit and wait for him to appear. Lady Arrington smiled back at Violet, but it was a little lackluster and Violet could still see the disappointment shimmering in her eyes.

"Good morning, Violet," her mother replied quietly. "I am glad to see you looking so refreshed."

"Thank you, Mama," Violet said, taking her seat. "Is Mary to join us? And Sarah?"

Her mother shook her head. "Lord Coatbridge wishes to speak to you alone, I believe," she said, although there was no note of judgment in her voice. "It will only be for a few minutes but given that you are engaged..." She paused for a moment as though she needed to steel herself a little. "Given that you are engaged to Lord Coatbridge, I will allow you a few moments together."

A swirl of nervousness caught Violet's stomach and she drew in a deep breath, steadying herself. Whatever Lord Coatbridge wished to say to her, she could only pray that it would be words of pleasure and happiness as opposed to disappointment and regret.

"I am still quite astonished, however," her mother continued, sounding almost weary as she spoke. "The Duke of Claverhouse seemed to be such a fine gentleman and he was to propose to you, Violet. Your father had given him his permission—"

"Which he then withdrew, given what he overheard," Violet

reminded her, knowing that to interrupt was considered most improper but feeling that it was required of her. Her father had told both Violet and Lady Arrington what had occurred, and Violet had felt a great swell of relief in knowing that there was no need for her to discuss or beg or plead for her parents to understand. In fact, Lord Arrington had seemed to be delighted in Lord Coatbridge's proposal and had congratulated Violet many times and with great exultation. Her mother, however, had not been so effusive. It appeared that she was struggling to accept that what she had thought and believed of the Duke was not the truth.

"Yes, yes, I am aware," Lady Arrington sighed, waving a hand. "It will be all through London now, of course. News of an engagement always spreads quickly." She smiled back at Violet and this time, there was a new brightness to it that Violet was glad to see. "Lord Coatbridge will make you an excellent husband, I am sure."

Violet opened her mouth to state that she thought the very same, but at that very moment, a scratch came at the door. In an instant, a flush of heat ran straight through Violet as her hands clasped together tightly, her fingers twisting this way and that as the butler came into the room to announce the arrival of Lord Coatbridge.

"Lord Coatbridge, my lady, Lady Violet." The butler stepped to one side and in walked the gentleman that, very soon, Violet would call husband. She rose to her feet, surprised at just how wobbly her legs felt. For whatever reason, she felt almost shy when it came to looking into Lord Coatbridge's face and indeed, it took her some time to do so. When she did, she was relieved to see that Lord Coatbridge's face held a warm smile.

"Lord Coatbridge." Lady Arrington sounded very welcoming, and her voice and expression held none of the disappointment that Violet had feared. "How glad I am to see you. Lord Arrington has told me of your delightful news, and I must tell you just how glad I am at the prospect."

"I am very glad to hear it, my lady," came the reply as Lord Coatbridge bowed towards her once more. "My heart is filled with both gratitude to Lady Violet for accepting me and relief that I shall no longer have to fear she may not." He laughed and Lady Arrington laughed also, only to then take a few steps forward towards Lord Coatbridge himself.

"I know, Lord Coatbridge," she continued, her voice a little softer than before, "that you would very much like to speak with my daughter alone for a few minutes. Therefore, I shall go to ring the bell for tea and when it arrives, I will return." She reached out and, after a moment, Lord Coatbridge took her hand and bent over it. Violet let out a long breath of relief as she saw the warm smile on her mother's face, a smile which reached her eyes. Finally, it seemed, her mother was truly contented at Violet's match.

"Thank you, Lady Arrington." Lord Coatbridge let go of the lady's hand and, after only a few moments, Violet found herself alone with him. The door remained ajar, of course, but aside from them both, there was no one else in the room. Violet swallowed hard, finding a swirling nervousness spiraling through her as she looked into Lord Coatbridge's eyes and saw the gentle expression on his face.

"Violet."

His voice was soft, his eyes holding a tenderness that Violet had not expected to see.

"Lord Coatbridge," she began, only to stop suddenly when he reached forward and caught her hand in his. Her breath caught for a moment at his touch, and she realized just how much she wanted to be back in his arms.

"The Duke's scheme is at an end," he said, softly, looking down into her eyes. "We are quite free of him." His smile faded just a touch. "I am sorry that I ever considered him a friend. I did not know the true nature that was within him."

Violet squeezed his fingers gently. "You could not have known," she answered, attempting to reassure him, to remove the cobwebs of guilt that still hung about his heart. "Everything that you have done thereafter has proven your determination to make certain that the Duke's plans came to naught." A small frown caught her brow. "I do hope that George is quite all right?"

Lord Coatbridge smiled down at her, a lightness in his eyes that spoke of hope. "Indeed, he is," he answered. "I spoke to him only this morning. After hearing all that had occurred, the fear seemed to leave him. After only a little persuasion, he brought both myself and one other to where he and the other boys lived." A heaviness came into his expression, and he looked away for a moment, as though he did not want to recall what he had seen. Violet's hand tightened on his.

“Was it very terrible?”

Looking back at her, Lord Coatbridge nodded. “I cannot pretend that it was anything other,” he answered, truthfully. “I would not hide their difficulty nor situation from you, Violet, but to go into detail is not necessary.”

She nodded. “I thank you for your consideration.”

“Franks is being...reprimanded for his crimes,” Lord Coatbridge stated, moving a little closer to her now. “When I say I went there with an acquaintance, I should explain that I took with me the rector of the parish. A man who is fair and just and also very well able to mete out a suitable reprimand.”

A cloud of relief swallowed her up. She did not wish to know what particular punishment Franks would suffer but was still glad to hear that he would not be permitted to continue on with his wicked ways.

Lord Coatbridge smiled down at her, his thumb running across the back of her hand as if to comfort her. “The boys present saw Franks being taken from his abode and knew that the threat was gone. Needless to say, after George spoke to them about what he had been offered, about what he had been given during his residence in my house, the other boys all seemed very eager to leave.” His eyes brightened once more. “It seems I am to have an abundance of errand boys!”

Such a happiness filled Violet that she could barely speak. She wanted to fling her arms about him, to hold him close to her and wonder at just how beautiful a soul this gentleman had. A gentleman that she could call her own. “Which leaves us with our current circumstance!” Lord Coatbridge laughed, “After it is all at an end, after we have struggled and fought, it seems that a great happiness is now to be ours.” Looking down into her eyes, Lord Coatbridge leaned towards her. “It seems we are engaged, Violet,” he said, a touch of laughter in his voice. “We are to be wed.”

She searched his face, seeing the curve of his mouth and the sparkle in his eyes. There had been a little worry in her heart, a little anxiety that he might begrudge her for what she had done. “You are not upset with me at doing such a thing, Lord Coatbridge?”

He shook his head. “There was nothing else you *could* do,” he replied with a small shrug. “I should have been the one to come up with such a brilliant plan so quickly in order to save you from



scandal. And, I confess that I have realized just how much happiness our engagement has brought me. I will be honored to have you as my wife.”

Relief and joy seared Violet’s soul and she let out a long breath, closing her eyes for a moment. “I am very glad to hear it, Lord Coatbridge.”

“Why, Violet, it cannot be that you believed I would be displeased.” Lord Coatbridge said, his hand reaching up and brushing gently down her cheek, making Violet’s breath hitch once more. “My dear lady, can you not see the truth that is held in my heart?”

Violet looked back into his eyes, her free hand now pressed lightly against her stomach as though this would help her to keep her composure. Her heart was beating wildly, her mind filled with nothing but what Lord Coatbridge had just revealed. She was hardly able to believe it, hardly able to take in what happiness this would now bring them both.

“I have found such a deep affection for you, Lady Violet, that it can be called naught but love,” Lord Coatbridge told her, moving closer to her. “You need never regret what you chose to say in that moment, for in doing so, you fulfilled my heart’s desire.”

“Truly?” she whispered, her free hand now settling on his chest as she marveled inwardly at all the wonderful sensations his nearness brought. “Lord Coatbridge, my heart cannot help but love you. You have shown, in almost every action and word, that you are the most worthy of all gentlemen. The way you have sought to protect me, to deliver me, and now, to honor me has bound my heart to yours forever.” Daring to be bold, she slipped both hands around his neck and drew his head down, her desire to experience something as yet unknown to her growing with every moment. “Knowing that you will be my husband and that I will spend my life with you has brought me such joy that I do not think it will ever be surpassed.”

His lips were on hers in a moment, and Violet was overcome by all manner of emotions and sensations that she could do nothing but respond in kind. Being pulled closer, his hands tight around her waist, Violet lingered long in his embrace. Her heart was full, her happiness fulfilled. There could be nothing greater than this.

“I love you, my beautiful, astonishing, wonderful Violet,” Lord Coatbridge murmured, breaking their kiss. “I swear to you that I

shall do all I can to make you as happy as you are in this moment through the rest of our lives.”

She smiled up at him, her eyes filled with none but him. “And I am certain, Lord Coatbridge, that you shall succeed.”

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